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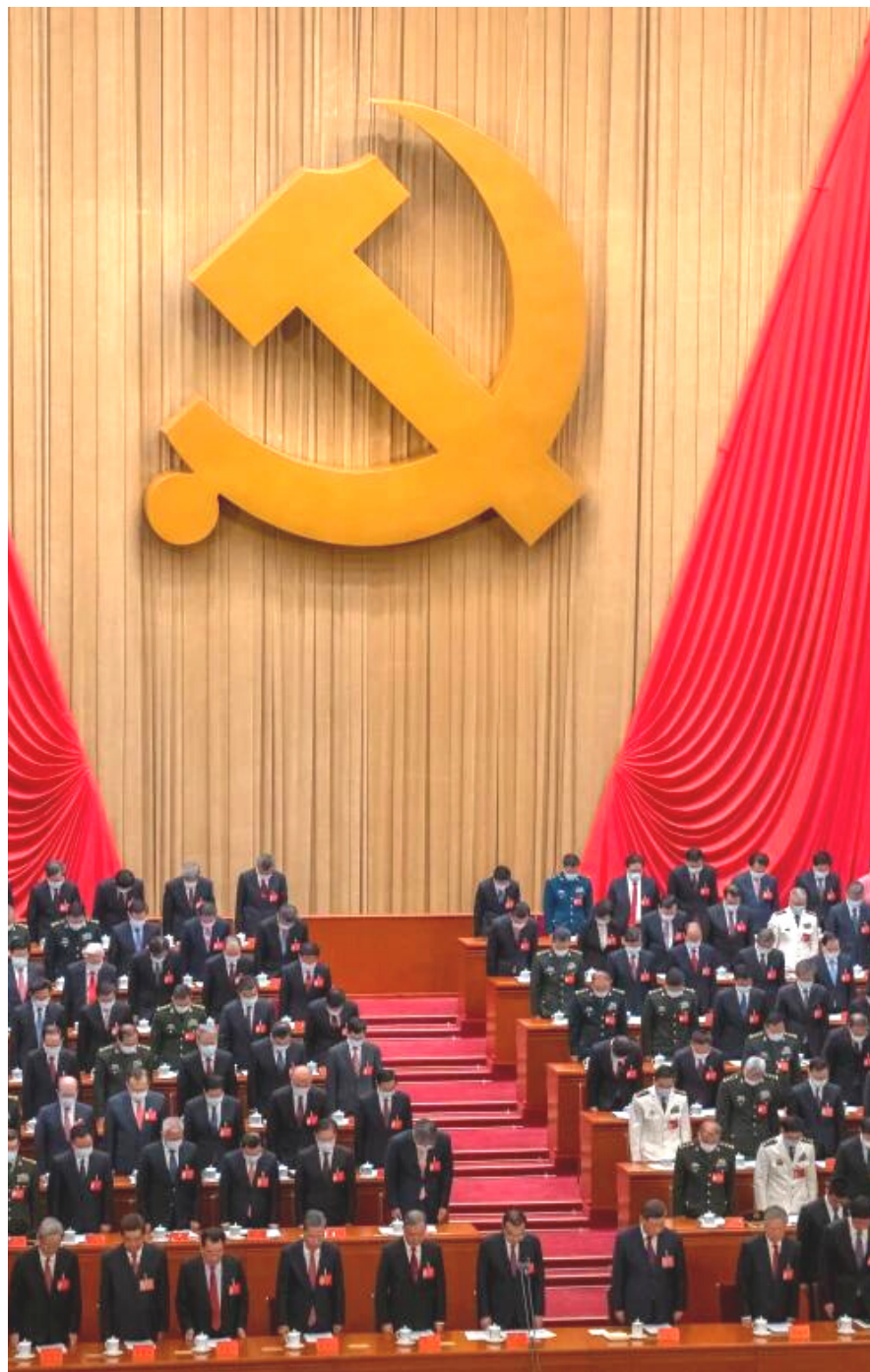


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Brig (Dr) RK Bhutani (Retd)

On 23 October 2022, Xi Jinping was appointed the general secretary of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) for a record-breaking third time, cementing his place as an unrivalled authority over the second largest economy of the world. Xi is now set for at least another five year term, with China watchers saying it is possible for him to remain the country's leader indefinitely, an observation bolstered by the fact that he did not anoint any successor like he did not during the 19th party national congress in 2017.



ANALYSIS OF THE 20TH CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY (CCP) CONGRESS PROCEEDINGS

The 20th CCP Congress will go down in history for allowing unprecedented centralisation of powers in the hands of Xi Jinping, demolishing several political factions within the CCP and making way for Xi's spectacular consolidation of power that provides no clear identification of the sixth generation of leadership. At the just concluded 20th CCP Congress in Beijing, two significant changes emerged:-

- First, the constitutional changes - the party congress constitution has been amended primarily to accommodate Xi's "core" status in the party and the political legitimacy that this entails among the rank and file. These were mentioned under "two establishes" and "two safeguards".

(At the November 2021 "third historical resolution", "two establishes" were promulgated to include Xi at the "core" of the leadership of the CCP and his "thought" as the "guiding" role for the rank and file. This was mentioned for the first time in early 2018 but did not come into circulation till late 2021. Further elevating the status of Xi were the "two safeguards" promulgated by the sixth plenary session of the 19th CCP in November 2021 that mentioned safeguarding the "core" status of Xi and his centralised authority. These two provide unprecedented powers to Xi in the party-state-army hierarchy).

Previously, to avoid any excesses committed by party leaders, Deng Xiaoping ushered in several checks and balances. He brought in the principle of "collective leadership" to avoid the drawbacks of a personality cult and a single leader amassing and abusing powers. Xi has thrown back Deng's safeguards to winds.

- Second, was the emergence of a new political pantheon that will rule for next five years and beyond. Though the proceedings were marred by the almost forceful eviction of former General Secretary Hu Jintao from the venue of the Congress.

Xi Jinping (69) packed his team of six new members of the CPC's Politburo Standing Committee (SC), the highest decision-making body in China, with loyalists – Chinese politicians who are known to have close links with him, thereby ruling out any policy dissonances.

Unlike acute differences between Xi's statist policies and Premier Li Keqian's different economic approach, the current politburo standing committee members owe their rise to Xi and hence can bend to his tunes. In the military, Xi Jinping continued as chairman of the all-powerful Central Military Commission with six members. By this selection, Xi eliminated any dissent or alternative viewpoint in the party and the army.

MEMBERS OF POLITBURO STANDING COMMITTEE: ALL XI'S MEN

- **Li Qiang (63)**, serving currently as Shanghai party chief, is selected by Xi as his second-in-command. Li Qiang belonged to the “new Zhijiang Army”—those who were associated with Xi during his term in Zhejiang, when the latter was the party chief of Zhejiang province in the early 2000s. Both were also in touch when Li enrolled at the Central Party School at Beijing of which Xi was the President. Li implemented Xi's harsh “dynamic zero COVID” policy in the commercial capital of Shanghai, forcing its populace to their knees.



Source: The Guardian

Despite criticism of his handling of the COVID pandemic in Shanghai, ***Li is promoted now and likely to become premier, when Li Keqiang retires in March 2023.*** Although Li has no experience at the central level and has not visited abroad extensively, he participated in the establishment of the first mega project of China International Import Expo at Shanghai in November 2018. He is also said to be instrumental in getting Tesla to Shanghai for making automobiles. His stint at Hong Kong Polytechnic University with executive business management subjects could provide an edge for him in addressing the emerging economic problems of the country.

- **Zhao Leji (65)**, the third-in-command, belongs to the traditional Tibet area of Amdo, now called Qinghai, but served in Xi's home province Shaanxi. Zhao is said to have kept the Shaanxi province safe and trouble-free for Xi. He was renominated for the politburo standing committee and headed Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, a post once occupied by Deng Xiaoping that keeps a tab on party cadres. Also, Zhao headed an alternative bureaucratic decision-making body, the "comprehensively deepening reform" that Xi floated to overcome the traditional "central small leading groups". Zhao is likely to head the country's parliament next March.



Source: Wikipedia



Source: The Economist

- **Wang Huning (67)**, the fourth important member of Xi's loyalists, has been retained. Wang surprised everyone for his endurance capacity serving Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and currently Xi as their script writer, ideologue and for prescribing "neo-authoritarianism" and party supremacy. Wang had written critically about US democracy and is said to be the scriptwriter for the last three generations of leaders in China. Wang also served in Xi's "comprehensively deepening reform" committees notably on internet controls. Wang is known to have brought in unprecedented curbs on information-sharing and internet security.

Wang is also associated with "three represents", "harmonious world" and currently "China Dream", "China rejuvenation" and other trendy slogans that captivated the country's political discourse. 1.As a workaholic, Wang is likely to further nudge Xi taking the path of ideological confrontation with the west and democracies in general and by exporting the authoritarian "China model" on to the world stage. In tune with Xi, Wang advocates self-reliance, decoupling with the west, and building China-specific soft power.

- **Cai Qi (67)**, the fifth ranking leader, is also a close associate of Xi, going back to the latter's stint as party chief of Fujian province in the 1990s and Zhejiang province in the 2000s. Thus, Cai Qi belonged to the "new Zhijiang Army". Like Xi, Cai was also affected by the Cultural Revolution when he was rusticated in early 1970s, and hence both share empathies. In 2012, Cai visited Taiwan as a member of a delegation from Zhejiang Province. With the current hard-line on Taiwan, Cai's advice must be invaluable to Xi. Cai served at the National Security Commission and as party chief of Beijing, the country's capital.



Source: Wikipedia

Zhao Leji and Wang Huning returned to the elite group from the previous committee, while the remainder four are new member but have worked with Xi during his time in Chinese provinces.



Source :China Daily

- **Ding Xuexiang (60)**, the 6th ranking leader, is in charge of the General Office of the CCP's Central Committee, the centre of all liaison with the party-state-army apparatuses. Ding is associated throughout with the "Shanghai gang" where Xi also worked briefly. (On the closing day of the 20th CCP, global media attention was drawn on how former leader Hu Jintao was unceremoniously jettisoned out of the venue of the congress. The person forcibly pushing out Hu was Kong Shaoxun, the trusted lieutenant of Ding Xuexiang).

- **Li Xi (66)**, the 7th ranking member, is from Guangdong and belonged to the Shanghai gang as well as Xi Jinping's home province Shaanxi and served specifically at Yanán—the revolutionary base of the CCP in the 1930s and 40s, after the Long March. Li undertook several major provincial assignments including Shanghai, Guangdong and the rust-belt Liaoning province. Li Xi has not directly worked with Xi, but is said to have close family ties and is also said to be close to him ideologically. No wonder, Xi took the entire top leadership to Yanan soon after the party congress.



Source: Wikipedia

AGE AND TERM LIMIT BROKEN AND ITS IMPACT

To curb gerontocracy and promote younger leaders, Deng Xiaoping had laid down 68 as the age limit for members of the highest decision-making body, the Politburo Standing Committee. This norm has been implemented since the 1980s. Also, to curb abuse of power and encourage talent, no more than two terms for these high offices were formulated in August 2006. These norms and rules have been thrown to the wind.

In the last three decades, there was a political consensus in the CCP on reform orientation and other fundamental issues. This is now broken with the Communist Youth League (CYL) almost demolished in the current selection process for the high posts. None of the bigwigs of the CYL like Li Keqiang, Wang Yang, Hu Chunhua, and others could make it. Jiang Zemin's faction fared no better. On the other hand, Xi's loyalists like Ding Xuexiang, Li Qiang, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang, Li Xi, and others could easily move into top positions.

All members of the Politburo Standing Committee are either in the mid or late-60s suggesting they will either retire after this term or, if the disregard for the age limit continues, remain for a life term—reducing the scope for young blood to enter the mainstream. The most significant issue is that no sixth-generation leader was identified at the end of the party congress.

Surprising omissions from these top posts were Xi's loyalist Chen Min'er, the current party secretary of the largest city in China, Chongqing. For the first time in 25 years, after five national congresses, not a single woman was named to the 24 member Politburo. Given that the current member, Sun Chunlan, is retiring, the second-highest decision-making body in the country will not have a woman on it for the next five years. Thus, the revolutionary changes brought in by the 20th CCP both in its structural and personnel frameworks have long-term implications for the domestic body politic of China, and for the rest of the world.

Overcentralisation of decision-making could possibly enable Xi to give vent to his world dominating ambitions. The "Yes men" definitely provide the advantage of 'unified' thinking and an uninterrupted execution of decisions, but such an exercise with unbridled powers with a few could land the country into many pitfalls. Moreover, increasing victimisation of other marginalised factional leaders could attract a backlash and bottlenecks in implementing national goals, leading to unanticipated setbacks for China.

CMC

The changes in the CMC have shown a willingness to break from the earlier norm by putting key individuals in place and the party gave preference to officers with specific experiences. As expected, Xi Jinping remained as CMC Chairman, and no heir-apparent was named as CMC Vice Chairman. The commission also remained the same size, with one Chairman, two Vice Chairmen, and four regular members. Three members from the previous CMC remain.

- **Gen Zhang Youxia (72).** Xi retained fellow "taizi" (princeling) to continue as Vice chairman of the CMC. Both also belong to the same Shaanxi province. At age 72 he is now the oldest official in the entire CCP Politburo.
- **Gen He Weidong (65).** The former Commander of the Eastern Theater Command, he replaced Xu Qiliang to become the second Vice Chairman. The Chinese leadership broke two notable norms in promoting him to the position of Vice Chairman. Almost all CMC members in the past few decades had a seat on the CCP Central Committee prior to their promotion to the CMC, and almost all CMC Vice Chairmen had experience as a CMC member before promotion to Vice Chairman. He Weidong had none. From late 2019 to early 2022, He was the Commander of the Eastern Theater Command, making him responsible for much of the PLA's activities related to Taiwan.

Prior to that He was Deputy Commander of the Western Theater Command and Commander of the Western Theater Command Army. In that position, He was reportedly involved in China's response during the Doklam Standoff, though available reports are not authoritative and the extent of his involvement is unknown. He also has links to Xi Jinping, having served in a Fujian-based army unit when Xi was Party Secretary of Fujian. Experience in these two important missions, coupled with ties to Xi Jinping, made He an appealing pick for Vice Chairman.

- **Li Shangfu (64).** Li Shangfu, the former head of the CMC Equipment Development Department, joined the commission and is expected to become the next Minister of National Defense, replacing Wei Fenghe. As head of the Equipment Development Department, Li was sanctioned by the U.S. government in 2018 due to Chinese purchases of advanced Su-35 fighters and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems. This promises to significantly complicate future U.S.-China ministerial-level interactions on military and security issues. He has also reportedly served in the space programme and was an asset to Xi in the PLA Strategic Support Force.
- **Liu Zhenli (58)** is currently the Ground Forces chief. Liu was promoted to the CMC, likely to replace Li Zuocheng as Chief of the Joint Staff Department. Liu is distinguished in being the only CMC member besides Zhang Youxia to have experience in real combat, having fought in border conflicts with Vietnam in the 1980s. His combat experience is a likely reason he is slated to serve in the important position of Chief of the Joint Staff Department. However, he has never served in a joint position.
- **Miao Hua (67)** served earlier at Lanzhou Military Region and has likely retained his position as head of the CMC Political Work Department.
- **Zhang Shengmin (64)** also belonged to Xi's home province Shaanxi and served at the rocket forces and has likely retained his position as head of Discipline Inspection Commission.

The CMC's new lineup offers several key takeaways:-

- First, it shows a surprising backward movement toward a more Army-dominated CMC. In the previous CMC, all four of the main service branches were represented. Now, four of the six military members are from the Army, with no representation from the Air Force.
- Second, Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin—the two CMC members who are not from the Army—rose through the ranks as political commissars. They do not have experience in operational command.
- Third, the CMC appointments suggest an emphasis on operational experience. Zhang Youxia was likely retained despite age norms due to his valuable experience in Vietnam border conflicts as well as experience in the Central and Northern Theater Command regions. He Weidong has valuable experience with Taiwan and also spent time in the Western Theater Command. Leadership in Beijing has likely assessed a crucial need to have two Vice Chairmen with experience across the major theaters of conflict, including a Vice Chairman with extensive experience on Taiwan. However, the dominance of the Army on the CMC is noticeable given that a Taiwan contingency would depend most heavily on PLA air and naval forces—not ground forces.
- 4.Fourth, the new CMC reflects deep experience in the areas of military equipment and defense science and technology. Both Zhang Youxia and Li Shangfu were directors of the Equipment Development Department—positions which gave them direct influence over PLA modernization efforts.
- Finally, political ties to Xi Jinping likely played a crucial role in CMC appointments, particularly the two top positions. In the wake of the 20th Party Congress, the CCP's new Politburo and its standing committee were heavily dominated by Xi loyalists. It is no surprise that all CMC members are loyal to Xi and his policy coordination efforts are expected to be smooth.

WILL THE XI-LI COMBINATION PROPEL CHINA TO THE GLOBAL FOREFRONT?

What perhaps endeared Li to Xi is that he had, since the beginning of his career in Zhejiang province, focused on rural poverty, disaster relief, sociology, management, engineering and other subjects. This mix of big business and rural poverty experience could come handy for Li when he eventually takes over as the Premier next March. However, Li's main drawback is his lack of strategic economic foresight to leapfrog China into number one economy in the world. To achieve that, Li has a very tough task ahead to alter the complete inherited structure.

EXPECTATIONS FROM XI'S THIRD TERM

Xi's next term will continue to see aggression in diplomacy abroad, and authoritarian decision-making at home. The growing Cold War and decoupling with the US will contribute to intensifying these trends. The clash of ideology and the fight for global influence between China and the US will intensify. Xi is likely to keep leaning into his more assertive 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy. In respect of Taiwan, Xi said "We will continue to strive for peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity and the utmost effort. But, we will never promise to renounce the use of force. And we reserve the option of taking all measures necessary." Xi has not forsaken the use of force but most likely, he would prefer to deploy gray zone tactics to advance China's interests in territorial disputes with neighbours such as India and Taiwan.

Xi's report to the party congress elevated the concept of Chinese-style modernisation, which indicates that he is determined to resist external pressure to steer the country on its own course.

For Xi, "control" is the operative word, and hence the centralisation of power. The economy is a major weakness, but under Xi economic growth is no longer the first priority, replaced by control. For him the challenge is that slow economic growth is related to his zero COVID policy, which is his signature policy that he will find hard to abandon. He may continue it for a few more months until the growth impact becomes untenable. China has not had serious economic reforms in over a decade. It relies more and more on deficit spending to achieve growth. Without a fundamental change in economic policy, growth will continue to slow.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

Though, it is too early to draw concrete conclusions for Sino-Indian relations or even for situation on the LAC but some inferences can be drawn from the way the 20th CPC Congress proceedings were conducted and from Xi Jinping's speech.

The presence of the commander of the PLA troops at Galwan, Qi Bao, among the party's 2,296 delegates from around the country, was prominently projected and a clip of the clash was shown too. The reminder about the Galwan clash was probably aimed to convey that it was not just Taiwan, which is the key issue for China but China had other challenges too. Qi Bao's presence was a message that China values war-fighting capabilities and militarism, something Xi Jinping also referred to in his speech.

For Xi Jinping, Taiwan is definitely a priority for which he cannot risk failure. There is an opinion amongst some Indian analysts that Xi would be open to resolving the boundary issue with India amicably now that he could be in a position of total dominance. That would free up China of all encumbrances with respect to the focus it could give to Taiwan and the Pacific theatre in general, where the next physical confrontations are possible with the United States and its allies and partners. That may be a very constricted view of Xi's personality because Xi has always been dominating the Chinese politics both internally as well as externally. The pressure being built-up on India through military standoffs at LAC has been carried out in a very planned and escalatory manner since 2013 from the time Xi took over reigns of CCP. If Xi decides to reduce tensions at LAC in Eastern Ladakh, that will be part of his bigger game plan to find a final solution to Taiwan, as also wean India away from QUAD in general and the US in particular.

Further, if China intends to handle Taiwan militarily, it cannot expect neutrality from India, diplomatically or otherwise, akin to that displayed by India for Russia in respect of Ukraine conflict because India-Russia relations and strategic partnership are on an altogether different plane. China is witnessing an India on the rise, much more confident, strategically more autonomous and sure of its geopolitical options. In the economic sphere, China and India are continuing with their trade as before, irrespective of their forces facing each other on the LAC. Balance of trade is immensely in favour of China and that suits it, particularly when its trade relations with the West are becoming problematic. China finds it convenient to engage with India through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

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