



PERSPECTIVES

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The Chinese Communist Party's 19th National Conference

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: On October 18, 2017, representatives of the Communist Party of China (CPC) met for their party conference, which takes place every five years. At the event, President Xi Jinping significantly consolidated his position in the party and the state. The Chinese leadership is facing complex challenges, but also has much to be proud of. The party is showing strength and stability, and is taking steps to demonstrate that China has leaders who can take the country forward to face the challenges of the future – even if its approach does not always comport with a Western worldview.

The Communist Party of China (CPC), the sole party in the country, meets every five years to discuss the future of China and choose replacements for vacated senior positions. On October 18, 2017, about 2,300 party representatives met for a week of discussions on the future of the giant state.

Admittedly, we know very little about what actually happened behind the closed doors of the conference. Most information about the decisions made during the event is taken from Chinese newspapers that are organs of the party and from the public speech of Chinese President Xi Jinping, which he delivered at the opening of the conference.

What we do know, via these sources, are the names of the people chosen to fill newly vacated senior positions. Han Zheng will serve as deputy prime minister; Zhao Leji has been appointed head of the campaign against corruption (a priority for the Chinese president since he took office five years ago); Li Zhanshu will serve as head of the National Congress of China; Wang

Yang will serve as chairman of the advisory council; and Wang Huning will be in charge of ideology, propaganda, and party organization. Little is known about these people. What can be said for certain, however, is that none of them threatens President Xi's position and none was identified as his heir.

The three-and-a-half-hour speech delivered by the president at the opening of the conference provides some limited insight on what is happening inside the party. Based on the speech and the atmosphere around the event, it can be determined that Xi has (unsurprisingly) fortified his grip on the party and the state.

In addition to being unanimously elected for a second term, Xi scored several other notable achievements. His thought paper was introduced into the party's constitution, he was appointed chairman of the Chinese central military committee, and he was able to conduct the conference smoothly without any interruptions from outside or inside.

Xi's thought paper, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Age," is now a part of the party's constitution, together with the writings of the revered Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, China's first two Communist leaders. The leaders who followed Mao and Deng did not earn a similar success, so this achievement has a special significance for the current president.

This achievement suggests that Xi might serve more than one term, as did Mao, or remain politically involved for many years to come after the official end of his term, as did Deng. In any case, it can be concluded that the Chinese leadership is steadfast, stable, and proud of its leader. It can also be inferred that there are no political surprises waiting around the corner. It would thus be in the interests of world leaders who wish for a good relationship with China to improve relations with Xi rather than wait for other scenarios to develop.

The purpose of the appointment of the current president as chairman of the Chinese military committee is to strengthen the military's position both within the party and without it. This step is part of Xi's grand plan to reinforce the military, march it forward, and prepare it for unspecified future challenges. To accomplish this, he once again declared the need to focus on technological advancement with respect to both the military and the economy.

It can be inferred from this that the Chinese president would like to see the economy become more open. This would mean allowing international companies to operate with more ease, which would in turn encourage technological advancements that China could use to its own ends. Xi often speaks of the need for such advancement and the Chinese government

encourages operations in this sector, as well as relations with countries that have proven knowledgeable in this field.

Israel is one of those countries, and technological cooperation between Jerusalem and Beijing is indeed flourishing. It should be noted that few of their joint advances are in the military sphere, due primarily to pressure on Israel from the US as well as historical events between the two countries related to such matters.

The fact that the conference proceeded without a hitch is another achievement for President Xi – though again, this perception is based on secondhand accounts of events that took place behind closed doors. Xi, who works hard to portray himself to the Chinese people as a leader at war with corruption, canceled many benefits to which conference participants were once entitled. These included haircuts, tailored suits, and expensive delicacies. It is unknown whether there was opposition to any of this from inside the party, but it does appear that these changes proceeded without disturbance.

North Korea, China's neighbor, did not perform any missile tests during the conference and did not try to seize global attention and embarrass Beijing. China's disputants over the South Chinese Sea, too, were quiet during the conference so as not to cause embarrassment to Xi. Nor did the arrival of US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Asia provoke any tension.

President Xi's words about China's anticipated economic and military growth were a message to the American president. As Xi put it, relations between the two countries are of utmost importance to him, and he wants to reassure the US that it is not China's intention to challenge American hegemony. According to Xi, China seeks to cooperate with the US and does not view relations with the US as a zero-sum game.

With that said, Xi warned his American counterpart not to support actions that endanger Chinese sovereignty, such as selling weapons to Taiwan.

It is difficult to know exactly what Xi meant when he said China is not trying to undermine American hegemony, because he also said that he expects China, under his leadership, to become the largest and strongest economy in the world. What is certain is that China under Xi is willingly leaving the job of world policeman to the US and has no intention of "wasting" its time trying to resolve conflicts around the world.

What was absent from President Xi's speech was any reference to the social aspect of continued Chinese growth – the desire of the Chinese people to be more involved in decisions that affect their own lives and future. The Chinese

middle class is growing, and so is the desire of its members to participate in national decision-making.

The president's neglect of this subject in his long speech can be interpreted two ways. It might imply that the regime's need to adopt reforms in its methodology is insignificant – or that it is in fact vast and intimidating, and therefore better avoided for the time being. Still, Xi's statement that China does not need to adopt foreign governing methods or social models seems a clear indication of the views of the party. When speaking about his intention to lead the country to be fully modernized by 2035, Xi did not mention any need to change governing methods. It is unclear whether or not China will be able to keep growing without political or social change, but then few would have believed China could reach where it is today without any such change.

The Chinese leadership is faced with many challenges, some of which it either ignores or suppresses. At the same time, it has much to be proud of. Over the past five years, over sixty million Chinese have risen above the poverty line. Externally, the party demonstrates resilience, stability, and belief in its leaders. The way the Chinese leadership approaches the coming challenges will not always seem consistent with Western thinking. After all, as Xi said: "We do not need to adopt any foreign ideas."

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