

**CHINA'S SIXTH PLENUM 2021:
HISTORICAL RESOLUTION
CEMENTS XI JINPING'S
CORE POSITION**

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Executive Summary

1. The Communist Party of China (CPC) held its sixth plenum in November 2021, which approved a key resolution on the CPC's major achievements and historical experience and affirms CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping's core position on par with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.
2. Since its founding, the CPC has only issued two historical resolutions, one by Mao and the other by Deng. The third resolution reiterated the official verdicts on the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square crackdown of 1989.
3. The Plenum divided CPC's history into four different periods of the new-democratic revolution (Mao); socialist revolution and construction (Mao); reform, opening up and socialist modernisation (Deng, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao); and socialism with Chinese characteristics (Xi).
4. Ten aspects of Party's 100 years of endeavours were written into the Resolution: upholding the Party's leadership, putting the people first, advancing theoretical innovation, staying independent, following the Chinese path, maintaining a global vision, breaking new ground (innovation), standing up for ourselves, promoting a united front; and remaining committed to self-reform.
5. At the plenum, no major personnel decisions at the top level were announced, implying that no heir apparent for Xi has been identified. This could be taken as a possibility that Xi will start a third term at the 20th Party Congress in 2022.
6. Massive reshuffling had taken place among provincial leaders prior to the Sixth Plenum. Between January 2020 and November 2021, 20 out of 31 provincial party secretaries and 25 out of 31 provincial-level governors/mayors had been reassigned, most of whom were born in the 1960s.
7. Xi's consolidated position at the Sixth Plenum will allow him to handle relations with the United States and other major powers more confidently. The Chinese

leadership is ready to ease tensions with the superpower and its strategic allies if the United States is willing to soften its stances on trade tariffs, technology, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

8. Xi is likely to continue to push through reforms that have encountered great difficulties. He has paid intensive attention to environmental protection, trade liberalisation, indigenous innovation, poverty reduction and military reform. The Chinese government is likely to continue with reforms in these areas.

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The Party Passes Resolution on Historical Experience

- 1.1 The 19th Party Central Committee (CC) held its sixth plenum from 8 to 11 November 2021. The plenum, attended by 197 CC members and 151 alternate CC members,¹ approved a key resolution on the major achievements and historical experience of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) 100 years of endeavours.
- 1.2 At the plenum, no major personnel decisions at the top level were announced, implying that no heir apparent for CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping has been identified. Such a void almost confirms that Xi will enjoy a third term at the 20th Party Congress in 2022.
- 1.3 The resolution, officially titled, "Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Communist Party of the Past 100 Years", acknowledged CPC's achievements and experience under the leadership of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. In particular, it highlighted new achievements and new experience accumulated by the CPC under Xi's leadership since 2012. The resolution also reiterated the official verdicts on the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square crackdown of 1989.²

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¹ The 19th CPC Central Committee (2017-2022) has 204 members and 172 alternate members. The number of absentees was the highest as compared to the previous five plenums since 2017. Most of the absentees could not attend the Plenum because of health problems or disciplinary investigations involving them. It is still unclear why high-profile CC members like Beijing Mayor Chen Jining and Deputy Secretary of the CPC Central Disciplinary Inspection Commission Liu Jinguo did not attend the Sixth Plenum.

² The resolution describes the Cultural Revolution as "a catastrophe" and "10 years of turmoil" and holds Mao responsible for it. The resolution also reiterates the Party's long-held position that the 1989 Tiananmen event was a "political turmoil" caused by both external and domestic forces. "Cultural Revolution was a catastrophe and Mao was responsible, China's Communist Party upholds in landmark statement",

- 1.4 In his explanation of the Resolution to the Sixth Plenum, Xi recapitulated the historical experience of the Party's 100 years of endeavours that were written into the Resolution in 10 aspects:³ upholding the Party's leadership; putting the people first; advancing theoretical innovation; staying independent; following the Chinese path; maintaining a global vision; breaking new ground (innovation); standing up for ourselves (persistent struggle); promoting a united front; and remaining committed to self-reform.
- 1.5 Since its founding, the CPC has only issued two historical resolutions put forward by Xi's two most powerful predecessors – Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Mao's resolution in 1945 established himself as the unchallenged authority within the party after a three-year "rectification" campaign that had his political and ideological opponents purged. Deng's resolution in 1981 was able to usher in a new era of reform and opening up by acknowledging Mao's errors in launching the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).
- 1.6 The release of the third resolution in the CPC history cemented Xi Jinping's core position in the Party on par with that of Mao and Deng, setting the stage for the 20th Party Congress scheduled in 2022 and to be presided by Xi in a once-in-five-year leadership reshuffle.
- 1.7 Massive reshuffling of provincial leaders had been conducted prior to the Sixth Plenum. Between January 2020 and November 2021, 20 out of 31 provincial party secretaries and 25 out of 31 provincial-level governors/mayors were reshuffled, with most of the new appointees born in the 1960s.
- 1.8 Immediately after the Plenum, some promising CPC Central Committee members, including Fujian Party Secretary Yin Li (born in 1962), Hubei Party Secretary Ying Yong (1957), Hunan Party Secretary Zhang Qingwei (1961), Zhejiang Party Secretary Yuan Jiajun (1962), Shandong Party Secretary Li Ganjie (1964), Minister of Science and Technology Wang Zhigang (1957) and Political Commissar of the

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3156299/cultural-revolution-was-catastrophe-and-mao-was-responsible>, accessed 17 November 2021.

³ http://www.news.cn/english/2021-11/16/c_1310314613.htm, accessed 22 November 2021.

PLA (People's Liberation Army) Ground Force Liu Lei (1957), were interviewed by the state-run China Central Television (CCTV) on their views of the Plenum in the famous *Xinwen Lianbo* news programme.⁴ Some of them are likely to be further promoted, or even enter the elite Politburo in 2022.

- 1.9 The Plenum's communiqué summarises the key achievements in the 100-year history of the Party and divides history into four different periods: the period of new-democratic revolution (Mao); the period of socialist revolution and construction (Mao); the new period of reform, opening up and socialist modernisation (Deng, Jiang and Hu); and the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Xi).⁵

International and Domestic Contexts

- 2.1 The Sixth Plenum was held when the CPC reportedly achieved its first centenary goal of *Xiaokang* society (moderately well-off society) and poverty elimination and “set out on a new journey towards the Second Centenary Goal”⁶ of becoming a modern socialist country by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. According to Xi's development vision, China should first double the size of its economy by 2035.⁷
- 2.2 Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and intensified tension with the United States, the CPC understands that “the external environment has grown increasingly complex and grave over the past year” under the combined impact of “worldwide changes of a scale unseen in a century (百年未有之大变局)” and the global coronavirus pandemic, while China is facing “extremely arduous tasks” in COVID-19 prevention and control as well as economic and social development at home.⁸

⁴ <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2021-11-12/doc-iktzscyy5018608.shtml>, accessed 12 November 2021.

⁵ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1238804.shtml>, accessed 12 November 2021.

⁶ “Full text of Chinese Communist Party's 6th plenum communique”, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Chinese-Communist-Party-s-6th-plenum-communique>, accessed 12 November 2021.

⁷ Chen Gang, “China's Fifth Plenum 2020: Five-Year Plan And Leadership Succession Void”, *EAI Background Brief*, No. 1566, 12 November 2020.

⁸ “Full text of Chinese Communist Party's 6th plenum communique”, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Chinese-Communist-Party-s-6th-plenum-communique>, accessed 12 November 2021.

- 2.3 Facing such severe domestic and international challenges, the CPC has given particular emphasis to the “dual circulation” strategy and “common prosperity” vision proposed by Xi. “Dual circulation” helps China to rely more on its indigenous innovation and other domestic capabilities in the pandemic and amid geopolitical tensions, while “common prosperity” aims to reduce regional disparities and income gaps for stability maintenance.
- 2.4 Under the “common prosperity” initiative, the CPC has been cracking down on the once untouchable tech titans including Alibaba and Tencent, property developers, entertainment industry and private education firms in 2021. The “dual circulation” strategy has forced Chinese companies to rely more on indigenous technology and domestic resources.
- 2.5 Xi’s consolidated position at the Sixth Plenum will allow him to handle relations with the United States and other major powers more confidently. After the Sixth Plenum, Xi and US President Joe Biden held a three-and-a-half hour virtual meeting, in which Xi called Biden “my old friend”.
- 2.6 The Chinese leadership is ready to ease tension with the superpower and some of its strategic allies if the United States is willing to soften its stances on trade tariffs, technology, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Beijing set three bottom lines with Washington when US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Tianjin in July 2021: (i) “the US must not challenge, slander or attempt to subvert the path and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics”; (ii) “the US must not seek to obstruct or break China’s development process”; and (iii) “the US must not infringe upon China’s sovereignty or damage its territorial integrity”.⁹ According to the Chinese government, these bottom lines accord with the principles agreed upon by the two countries in the three China-US Joint Communiques.
- 2.7 The strained China-US relationship has thawed recently. The Biden administration has declared that the United States is not seeking to change or contain China. In an interview with CNN in November 2021, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said that the United States is seeking coexistence with China rather than

⁹ “No intent to change China in US policy”, *China Daily*, 12-18 November 2021, p. 12.

containment or a new cold war. The Biden administration did not intend to repeat “one of the errors” of previous policies by seeking to transform the Chinese system, he said.¹⁰

2.8 In November 2021, China and the United States surprisingly announced at the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow that they had agreed to cooperate on limiting emissions to address the global climate crisis, a thawing sign to the deteriorating bilateral relationship in the past few years. A pathway is now open for the two countries to engage in continuous bilateral dialogue in the formulation of concrete actions against climate change.

2.9 China aims to extend cooperation with the United States to other realms and avoid another Cold War. “The Asia-Pacific region cannot and should not relapse into the confrontation and division of the Cold War era”, Xi said in a recorded video message to a CEO forum on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.¹¹ Ahead of a scheduled virtual meeting with US President Joe Biden in November 2021, Xi said China is willing to work with the United States, on condition of mutual respect.¹²

Plenums as CPC’s Decision-making Platforms

3.1 According to the CPC charter, the five-year term CPC Central Committee selected by the Party Congress is the Party’s highest leadership body.¹³ During the five-year tenure, the Central Committee normally convenes seven plenary sessions in total (Table 1) to approve important policy directions and announce personnel reshuffles.

¹⁰ “US wants coexistence not cold war with China, Jake Sullivan says”, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3155320/us-wants-coexistence-not-cold-war-china-jake-sullivan-says>, accessed 15 November 2021.

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/10/china-xi-warns-against-returning-to-cold-war-era-tensions>, accessed 12 November 2021.

¹² <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/10/biden-meeting-looms-chinas-xi-ready-to-work-conditionally-with-us.html>, accessed 11 November 2021.

¹³ Article 10 of the CCP charter, <http://www.12371.cn/2017/10/28/ARTI1509191507150883.shtml>, accessed 9 November 2021.

TABLE 1 AGENDAS OF THE PARTY PLENUMS

Plenum	Agendas
1st Plenum	Electing members of the Political Bureau, its Standing Committee and the CPC General Secretary immediately after the Party Congress
2nd Plenum	Proposing a list of candidates for the leadership of the state government and National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (China's top political advisory body) to the National People's Congress
3rd Plenum	Introducing the new leadership's broad socioeconomic and political reforms
4th Plenum	Discussing further improvements to the CPC's governing capacity
5th Plenum	Introducing the next Five-Year Plan for China's social and economic development
6th Plenum	Discussing ideological, social and cultural issues
7th Plenum	Discussing the work report drafted by the Political Bureau and setting a date for the next CPC Party Congress

Source: Compiled by the author.

- 3.2 Most CPC plenums are held in the final quarter of the year and the legislation of these decisions will be carried out in the subsequent quarter of the annual session of the National People's Congress, China's top legislature, scheduled in early March.
- 3.3 The first two plenums of the Central Committee are normally held together with the quinquennial CPC Party Congress. Massive changes in economic policy and the launching of political reforms are normally revealed at the third plenum especially when there is a change in the country's leadership.¹⁴
- 3.4 For Xi's second term as Party general secretary, the second and third plenums held respectively in January and February 2018 deviated from the conventional agenda-setting for these two plenums. The second plenum proposed amending China's constitution that included abolishing the two-term limit of the paramount leader, establishing supervisory commissions as a new type of anti-graft state organ, listing ecological advancement as a new function and power of the State Council, delegating legislative power to more cities and promoting harmonious relations among ethnic groups.

¹⁴ "Introduction to China's Plenary Sessions and the CPC Central Committee", China Briefing, 11 November 2013.

- 3.5 The third plenum, which traditionally discusses issues of economic reforms, was held about eight months ahead of schedule; it approved a sweeping plan to merge Party and state institutions, and strengthen Party's grip over administrative, military and parliamentary apparatus.
- 3.6 After the third plenum, the Party has taken over the responsibilities of six State Council institutions previously dealing with matters concerning the civil service, the press and publication, film sector, ethnic affairs, religious affairs, overseas Chinese affairs, computer network and information security. At the Party level, four central leading groups made it to the Central Committees. The portfolios of these groups were (1) deepening overall reform, (2) cyberspace affairs, (3) financial and economic affairs and (4) foreign affairs, reflecting some of the top concerns at the Party level.
- 3.7 Since then, there was no plenum till October 2019 when the fourth plenum was back on track to discuss the CPC's governing capacity, a traditional agenda set for all fourth plenums (Table 1). The national security law for Hong Kong to deal with large-scale unrest in the Special Administrative Region was mooted at the fourth plenum.
- 3.8 Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and intensified tension with the United States, the fifth plenum in October 2020 approved proposals on formulating China's 14th Five-Year Plan and a vision for development by 2035. It also focused on indigenous innovation and other domestic capabilities. No major personnel decisions at the top level were announced at the plenum, thus no heir apparent for Xi was identified. As fifth plenums were often used to shed light on power succession, such a succession void sent a signal to the outside world that Xi is likely to stay in power after the 20th Party Congress in 2022.
- 3.9 During the interim, the Politburo and its seven-member Standing Committee, with fewer members but constituting the power core of the CPC Central Committee, have met more frequently than the Central Committee and made decisions on more specific and day-to-day affairs.

What to Expect after the Sixth Plenum

- 4.1 As no major personnel decisions at the top level were announced at the Sixth Plenum in 2021, it left the issue of power reshuffle open. Amid “changes unseen in 100 years”¹⁵ put by Xi, CPC’s leadership transition and elite politics are still facing huge uncertainties ahead of the 20th Party Congress. Past experiences and existing informal rules may not necessarily guide future reshuffles.
- 4.2 Dark horses could emerge in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress after the massive personnel reshuffling in provinces, ministries, central Party agencies and armed forces in 2021. China has been promoting many technocrats chiefly from the military, aerospace, electronic and environmental engineering, medical or other strategic new industries at the ministerial/provincial level during Xi Jinping’s tenure. Behind this new round of technocracy is China’s ambition to seek tech supremacy, a cleaner environment, and integration of military and civilian industries.
- 4.3 More technocrats are expected to join the Politburo at the 20th Party Congress, with some likely to join the zenith Politburo Standing Committee. Technocrats with political proximity to Xi and his top aides will have an edge over their peers in the power transition.
- 4.4 After consolidating his core position in the Party, Xi is likely to continue to push through reforms that have encountered great difficulties. By the end of 2020, China had rolled out 2,485 reform plans¹⁶ approved by the Third Plenum¹⁷ in 2013. To address controversies and eliminate obstructions, Xi would need to have the final say.¹⁸ As compared to his predecessors, Xi has paid more attention to environmental protection, trade liberalisation, indigenous innovation, poverty reduction and

¹⁵ “Xi Jinping calls for self-reliance amid change ‘unseen in 100 years’”, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/xi-jinping-calls-for-self-reliance-amid-change-unseen-in-100-years-119010100919_1.html, accessed 29 September 2021.

¹⁶ “Leading the CPC on a new journey”, *China Daily*, 12-18 November 2021, p. 17.

¹⁷ For details of the Third Plenum in 2013, please refer to Chen Gang, “China’s Third Party Plenum: Xi Consolidates Power With Socioeconomic Overhaul Plans”, *EAI Background Brief*, No. 871 (28 November 2013).

¹⁸ “Leading the CPC on a new journey”, *China Daily*, 12-18 November 2021, p. 17.

military reform; it is likely the Chinese government will carry on reforms in these areas.

- 4.5 Xi's signature anti-corruption campaign is ongoing unabated, with more than 20 ministerial-level officials being placed under investigation in 2021. There is no sign that the CPC will let up on such a momentum.
- 4.6 With the consolidation of power, Xi is empowered to handle China's relations with the United States and other powers more confidently. China is ready to ease tension with the superpower and its strategic allies with the granting of some concessions as long as China's core national interests are not infringed.