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The Chinese Communist Party at 100: What's next?

By Bert HOFMAN and Frank PIEKE

As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) prepares for its 100th anniversary of its founding, it has much to celebrate. The Party has come very far since its humble beginnings in Shanghai. When it convened there for its first party congress in July 1921, aided by Dutch COMINTERN delegate Henk Sneevliet, it had only 57 members. Today, the CCP has more than 92 million members and is the second largest political party in the world after India's Bharatiya Janata Party. In between, it formed not one, but two alliances, one with the Guomindang and fought a civil war with it, founded the People's Republic, and another with the Soviet Union, and survived a revolution that Mao Zedong unleashed on the party.

Following the disruptions and disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping led the CCP to abolish class struggle as its main aim, and focused on developing China's vast productive forces, to great effect. China achieved its "moderately prosperous society" in time for the centennial celebration of the party and eradicated extreme poverty. It has also become the largest economy in the world in terms of comparable prices. China has vastly increased its presence in the world economy, in world diplomacy and global governance, and in military might.

In the past decade, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping has profoundly changed the ethos, organisation and ways of governing the party. The party has sharpened its ideology and discipline, fought corruption and factionalism, and expanded its membership. The party – with Xi at the core – is now more than ever since the start of the reforms in 1978 firmly in control of the government, the army, the organs of representative government, the judiciary and, increasingly, business and society.

For China's New Era the party has set new, more ambitious goals for 2035 and 2049 that focus on making China a fully developed nation and a great power with a global reach. Achieving these goals is not a given. Some of the key domestic challenges are high inequality in income, wealth and opportunity, continued reliance on debt-fuelled investment as the engine for growth, the lack of productivity growth, and the country's ageing population that puts high demands on health care, pensions and the government coffers.

EAI COMMENTARY

Internationally, the adversarial relations with the United States and increasingly with other developed democracies, as the recent G-7 summit illustrates, pose the threat of containing China's rise. China sees itself as a responsible power that contributes to solving the world's problems through the existing international order, but others depict China as a revisionist power bent on altering that very same international order.

How China will address these problems crucially depends on the further evolution of the CCP. As its hundred-year history has shown, the CCP is an ever-changing organisation and there is little doubt that the party will continue to evolve as China changes. Three dimensions of the party's future evolution are key: the internal dynamics of party politics, the party's governance of society and the party's role in a China with a strong international presence.

THE FUTURE OF PARTY POLITICS

When Xi Jinping ascended to power in 2012, he believed that the party had become leaderless, corrupt and permissive, threatening its very rule and perhaps even its existence. Under Xi, party building became once again a main focus for the leadership. The principles of the "party leads on everything", "top-down design" and the merging of the roles of party and state made the party a more effective and centralised instrument of comprehensive strategic policymaking for the CCP. In parallel, party membership, organisation, ideology and discipline were thoroughly overhauled and strengthened.

Xi Jinping viewed this party building as critical for the continuation of its leading role for the next hundred years. At the same time, this effort has generated new systemic vulnerabilities that over the next decade or so may threaten the success of the party.

First, with the party and its general secretary increasingly and directly responsible for all aspects of day-to-day government, they are more directly accountable for successes as well as failures. As a result, critique on the course the party has taken or even reporting on failure of party politics is seen as criticism of the leadership itself. This risks a perpetuation of ineffective policies and failure to adopt better solutions.

Second, the sharp reduction in the room for manoeuvre that China's political system traditionally afforded local party officials reduces waste and corruption. At the same time, tightening the reins of control comes at a price: rather than take the initiative and to provide bottom up solutions for China's policy challenges, local officials now often limit themselves to executing orders for fear of displeasing the centre. This fear could paralyse the engine of new policy ideas and adaptations that boosted China's growth in the past.

Third, Xi's anti-corruption campaign has created enemies of the leadership within the party, many of whom remain powerful and have their own extensive network of followers and clients. While these forces are unlikely to see a comeback during Xi's term, in a post-Xi era they may resurface.

These systemic issues are magnified by Xi's abolition of the CCP's succession rules introduced by Deng Xiaoping. Xi will likely get a third term as general secretary at the 20th CCP Party Congress next year. With no successor in sight, Xi could be compelled to perpetuate his rule for as long as he can, side-lining potential competitors, and safeguard his legacy and reputation. While this may increase stability during his time in office, it increases the risk of a disruptive succession struggle after Xi.

Although this was never intended, Xi's indeterminate term in office may risk some of the characteristics of a one-man rule that may undo some of the real gains in party building, rules-based governance and the rule by law that he initiated.

THE FUTURE OF THE PARTY'S GOVERNANCE OF SOCIETY

The CCP has never been a mere “governing party”, but a pervasive organisation, a vanguard party with a mission to create a “new China” that can take its rightful place among the world nations.

The CCP pursues governability, social stability and social order with a range of tools, of which outright repression is just one. For the party, shaping a new society involves “social management”, “social governance”, “population quality” and “social stability”. Civil society is the handmaiden of government, while party institutions and party branches are embedded across society. Surveillance technologies, big data analysis of social media and the internet, and the social credit system create the incentives and sanctions for citizens to behave as expected.

As the party moulds society to its own image, its rule has been normalised as part of the way things are and no longer requires force and justification.

Normalisation of the party also opens up options beyond the legitimisation of power or the perpetuation of rule. While the party is no stranger to planning, more recent approaches to address policy challenges are now beginning to take on a distinctly corporatist flavour.

The party is not just a regulator of markets, but is increasingly present in companies themselves, be they public or private. The party has made clear that companies are to serve the broader society and the goals of the party. The CCP treats China increasingly as being one collective body with itself as the head that plans, directs and coordinates the actions of its parts.

Corporatism as an approach to politics and governance is found in all kinds of political systems, including democratic ones. In China the difference is that the CCP as the leading force continues to arrogate the power to determine what is in the best interests of the Chinese body politic.

Corporatism comes with a general intolerance of diversity, especially where the party is presented as the embodiment of Chinese culture and Chinese rule. Where the party and the country are supposed to be of one body and mind, the nation must follow. Non-Chinese minorities and non-native religions, for instance, are no longer seen as an integral part of the Chinese nation, but as alien bodies that must be contained and assimilated.

For most Chinese citizens, the results that this system delivers in terms of growth, opportunities and stability are sufficient reason for them to accept the party as legitimate, a point often repeated in the party’s messaging. Whether the society the CCP is thus creating is fit for the 21st century is an open question and a central one in the emerging era of international systemic competition.

THE FUTURE OF PARTY SUPERPOWER

Becoming a superpower has consequences. A superpower not only behaves differently in the international arena, but also becomes a different entity altogether. For superpower China the world order no longer provides incentives for convergence to liberal norms and institutions established by western powers in the aftermath of World War II.

As a superpower, China is increasingly inclined to change these norms and institutions, and in the process is strengthening its own neo-socialist order, both domestically and abroad. The poor performance of liberal democracies in recent decades, be they economic, political or even the disregard of international norms themselves, only propels China to seek its own path.

EAI COMMENTARY

After World War II, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union quickly deteriorated to the existential animosity of the Cold War. Although perhaps unintentionally, the two superpowers came to frame all geo-political events as part of their global rivalry, feeling compelled to ever expand their reach and capacity. An obsession with “national security” fed suspicion of the enemy’s presence everywhere and a mounting intolerance of opinions that presented their nation’s rival as anything else than irredeemably evil.

As a rising superpower, China is rapidly catching up with the United States in establishing a national security framework. Examples are establishing a National Security Commission, passing national security legislation, and establishing a direct line of command between the CCP general secretary and the military.

China’s military build-up and modernisation rely heavily on civil-military cooperation. Tapping into the innovations, skills and capital of the private sector, civil-military fusion pulls away from inefficient traditional military enterprises. However, this also infuses a security dimension in addition to a political dimension into the increasingly tight relationship between business and the party. Moreover, according to the new defence law, protecting China’s *economic* interests now also becomes one of the tasks of the PLA. In time, these links could evolve into a military-party-industrial complex with increasing influence over foreign and domestic policymaking.

In China’s new 14th Five-Year Plan (FYP), security also plays a more prominent role than in the past. The term appeared some 72 times in the 12th FYP (2011-2015), but 172 times in the latest 14th FYP. Food security and energy security are now part of the key performance indicators of the plan. More broadly, China’s “Dual Circulation” strategy, with increased reliance on domestic critical supply chains and indigenous innovation can equally be considered as shoring up national security—with some of it brought about by the external pressure of the United States.

The rapidly shrinking space for debate and discussion in Chinese society and academia could at least in part also be interpreted in light of national security. Opinions that stray from the party line are no longer just politically suspect, but may be fomented or manipulated by the enemy “out there”, becoming tools to undermine the party, socialism and ultimately China.

Abroad, the Chinese government and the CCP are increasingly present and proactive, as the debates on Chinese foreign influence in countries ranging from the United States to Australia to the EU demonstrate. Following the example of the United States, China has initiated the extraterritorial application of its national security legislation. The CCP is also actively building its own organisational presence abroad. This is chiefly intended to tie Chinese actors into the political system back home and to ensure that the CCP’s strategic ends and China’s reputation and soft power strategy are not undermined by their activities abroad.

At present, ethnic Chinese and Chinese permanently residing abroad are still excluded from party building work and only subject to the CCP’s overseas Chinese policies. However, as the CCP’s interests and weight abroad grow, fencing off overseas Chinese from domestic CCP policy and influence may no longer be deemed expedient or necessary. Gradually, the CCP may then evolve into the leading political force of global China, exercising direct control over Chinese individuals, institutions, businesses and organisation wherever they may be.

A PARTY FIT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY?

The CCP as it has evolved in the first two decades of this century, and especially since Xi Jinping came to power, is well positioned to meet the policy challenges that will come its way, and confident that it can do so. Over time, the party’s new political dynamics could create fault

EAI COMMENTARY

lines in the political system, in particular as the Xi succession approaches. However, these are unlikely to weaken the party to the extent that it will seriously threaten its rule.

The CCP's evolving domestic governance also entails inherent risks, but again none of these are likely to present an existential threat. The opposite is much more likely: as the CCP shapes society increasingly in its own image and "naturalises" its rule, calls for freedom and democracy will become increasingly rare and easier to counter.

In the longer term, however, the straightjacket of Xi's corporatist planning and control might not sufficiently accommodate the divergent and diverse interests of individuals, businesses, institutions and groups that make up China's vast society. The question is whether these interests will reassert themselves in a post-Xi era and whether they could unravel the corporatist body politics that Xi's era has been creating.

Domestically, the impact of China's superpower status on the party is at present more difficult to assess. There is a possibility that the focus on "comprehensive national security" and militarisation could undermine the CCP's primacy, but it is more likely that the CCP will manage to use its time-honoured organisational and ideological tools to keep this risk at bay.

Internationally, "comprehensive national security" and attempts to re-centre the global order around China are bound to complicate China's international relationships—not just with the West or democratic countries, but also with any other great powers of the future.

The world cannot be governed the way the CCP is accustomed to in China itself. As Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States found out before it, hegemony and total control are very different things indeed. The CCP's rising global influence and extension will certainly meet a spirited pushback, especially from developed Western countries, which will frame this as part of their systemic rivalry with China.

Today, the relationship with the United States remains of paramount importance. The risk is that both sides of this deepening conflict fall into the same trap as the Soviet Union and the United States did 70 years ago. Both the United States and China frame their rivalry as systemic, perhaps even existential. Both claim that their system is superior and must therefore prevail.

The United States and China in the heat of their current clashes need to realise that theirs is a rivalry not between systems, but between superpowers. Such a realist view of their relationship opens up the way to an accommodation or at least an understanding of each other's core interests, so as to minimise causes of conflict. The Thucydides trap of inevitable war between an emerging and an established power can and must be avoided.

Bert HOFMAN is Director of the East Asian Institute and Professor in Practice of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Frank PIEKE is Visiting Research Professor of the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

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