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# The Manifesto of Leninism for the 21st Century: The First Take on the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China

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**R**epresenting the government with the Party, exemplifying the rule of law of the state with Party disciplines; driving social revolution with the Party's self-revolution; and creating a "new form of human civilisation" by building "socialism with Chinese characteristics" — Lenin's vanguard party model was lifted by "Xi Jinping Thought" to a whole new level. Call it "Leninism for the 21st century", with the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) its manifesto.

"Strictly governing the Party in an all-round way" and "keep the party's vitality forever" are considered by China's President Xi Jinping to be the main characteristics of Chinese-style modernisation and the key to rejuvenating the Chinese nation. "Ensure that the entire Party maintains a high degree of consistency with the Party Central Committee in terms of political stance, political direction, political principles, and political path, and ensures the unity and uniformity of the Party". On the basis of such a competent party, "upholding the party's comprehensive leadership, adhering to socialism with Chinese characteristics, and implementing the new development philosophy" — that's Xi Jinping's potion to China's rise. In his report to the Party Congress, Xi asserted that the CPC "have come to this understanding through many decades of practice. It is a conclusion of paramount importance that we must cherish, uphold and never deviate from".

While this may sound complicated and convoluted, it is the characteristic of "Xi Jinping Thought". Xi's work report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China used more than 32,000 words to describe this complex system of thought, which will determine

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the nature, shape, trend and behaviour of China in the foreseeable future, as well as China's relationship with the world, especially that with the United States and other Western countries. So how do we evaluate the platform of the 20th Party Congress? Let's discuss first its strengths. Undoubtedly, the 20th Party Congress has ended the long-term wrangling between the left and the right, clarified the direction for the country, formulated a comprehensive plan and some specific guidelines and policies in accordance with the established goals, and cleared the way in terms of personnel. China will not take the capitalist road and adopt electoral democracy, but pursues "Chinese-style modernisation", which is defined as "adhering to the leadership of the Communist Party, upholding socialism with Chinese characteristics, achieving high-quality development, developing whole-process people's democracy, enriching the people's spiritual world, and realising the common prosperity of all the people and the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, the building of a community with a shared future for mankind, and thereby creating a new form of human civilisation".

The values underlining this platform, apart from the CPC's absolute leadership, should be widely acceptable to the world. In the event that China has made outstanding achievements in realising these values, then "Chinese-style modernisation" will have great attraction for emulating and learning from, making it one of the pioneers of a new form of post-capitalism for the human civilisation.

Who would object to these values? — nurturing uncorrupt and upright government officials; advocating common prosperity, eradication of poverty, protection and improvement of the ecosystem, resources and environment; establishing the rule of law; building a clean and devoted ruling party; promoting people-centred development and all-round development of man; improving public services and social security system; building a "healthy China"; pursuing green and sustainable development; maintaining social stability; improving governance effectiveness; encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship; strengthening science, technologies and education; improving the market economic system; fostering national spirit and cultural traditions; revitalising the rural areas; upgrading infrastructures; adhering to the wider opening to the outside world; ensuring better enforcement of property rights; institutionalising "whole-process democracy"; furthering co-construction, co-governance and the shared benefits of grassroots self-governance; following the path of peaceful development; advancing multilateralism and free trade; building a community with a shared future for mankind; strengthening international cooperation; and assisting developing countries.

The CPC believes that its system is better equipped to deal with many of the problems facing humanity that are difficult or even impossible to deal with under a capitalist liberal democracy. One of the characteristics of the platform of the 20th Party Congress is that it is comprehensive, systematic, forward-looking and coordinated, with specific and feasible goals, and a clear timeframe for implementation. A second characteristic is the accompaniment of large-scale institutional building. In the past 10 years, apart from party building where the bulk of Xi's effort has been devoted, great progress has been made in developing the legal system, enhancing environmental protection and improving the governance systems, for example, instituting the "river chief" or "lake chief" system by popularising the notion that "green water and lush mountains are gold and silver mountains", and improving the cadre assessment system, market institutions and regulatory framework. Even in areas generally regarded as the weak points of the CPC, such as democracy, the 20th National Congress promised building up institutions for "whole-process democracy", such as "strengthening the work-capacity building of the deputies to the people's congress, and strengthening the connection between its deputies and their constituency, and building up mechanisms for gathering public opinion and people's wisdom, and a system of grassroots legislative contact points". The intent is to lay the institutional foundation for the next stage of China's development.

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The third characteristic is the return to the rich cultural traditions of the nation. It seems that Marxism has been culturalised to serve practical purposes. For example, the political report claims such wisdoms in China's cultural and philosophical traditions as "pursuing common good for all; regarding the people as the foundation of the state; governing by virtue; discarding the outdated in favour of the new; selecting officials on the basis of merit; promoting harmony between humanity and nature; ceaselessly pursuing self-improvement; embracing the world with virtue; acting in good faith and being friendly to others; and fostering neighbourliness", and so on. These maxims, reflecting the Chinese way of viewing the universe, the world, society and morality, have "a high degree of conformity with the propositions of scientific socialism". The purpose here is to "integrate the essence of Marxism with the best of fine traditional Chinese culture and with the common values that our people intuitively apply in their everyday lives".

Unlike domestic Chinese media and public opinion that focus almost exclusively on the aforementioned, foreign media zero in on a completely different set of variables, not least Xi Jinping's breaking term limits and staffing the new Politburo, especially the Standing Committee, almost entirely with his proteges. A unitary system with a high concentration of power can not only create great achievements as Xi clearly believes and China's record shows, but also commit heinous crimes. From the Western understanding of human nature, the former is a possibility while the latter is inevitable. Hitler, Stalin, Mao and so on all had extraordinary achievements, but also committed monstrous crimes in the end. With such ending, extraordinary achievements can only be seen as extraordinary threats. Consequently, the greater China's achievements, the greater the threat.

Therefore, one of the negative effects of the 20th Party Congress is that Sino-Western relations are likely to deteriorate further and their confrontation further intensify. Western political theory and political wisdom do not pay much attention to party platforms because it is common for politicians to make glowing campaign promises, only to break them after election. Western observers see a trend of totalitarianism under the personalistic centralisation of power in the CPC. For them, totalitarianism is necessarily evil. Compared with previous totalitarian dictatorships, the emerging Chinese one is based on unprecedented power and magnitude. The dictatorial power that is not only unchecked and unbalanced, but also aided by modern technological means is especially terrifying, and they may feel the urgency to unite in a struggle against it.

Xi saw this coming clearly. He not only describes China's rise as a "great struggle", but also incorporated "dare to struggle and be good at struggle" into the new party constitution, emphasising "persistently carrying forward the spirit of struggle and strengthening the pride, backbone and confidence of the people of all ethnic groups that they are not to believe in evil, not to be afraid of ghosts and not to be afraid of pressure". In the foreseeable future, the international environment for Chinese development may further deteriorate, along with a rise in the danger of war.

The second negative effect is domestic, including 10 years of passivity by cadres, sluggish economic growth and private business owners voting with their feet. The biggest danger however is that after the spirit of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and "philosophy of struggle" is re-summoned; what the red tide brought in its wake may sweep China back to the revolutionary zeal of Mao's time and its idealism that still has a hold on Xi's generation of princelings. Today's younger generation of party members and cadres grew up in the materialism of the reform and opening up era. They have neither personal experiences of suffering in the Mao era nor clear understanding of the madness of the Mao era. In response to Xi's call for making "intraparty political life more politically oriented, in keeping with the time,

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principled and effective” and making “full use of criticism and self-criticism and keep working at purifying the political ecology within the party”, they may eagerly embrace the Cultural Revolution-style redneck “philosophy of struggle”.

The third negative effect is rigidity. To formulate such a huge plan as Xi Jinping Thought under “changes unseen in a century”, it is all the more important to build adequate mechanisms for correction and adaptation. However, the entire work report and agenda of the conference did not adequately address the severe situation facing China both inside and outside. Except for the determination of “struggle”, no countermeasures were in sight. The CPC’s self-perception is seriously out of syn with its reputation in the world: when the country and its leaders are hitting new lows in Western polls, the regime is not seriously reviewing and seeking remedies. Instead, it continues to talk about “Tell China stories well, spread Chinese voices well, and present a credible, lovely, and respectable image of China”, while unleashing the “wolf warrior diplomacy” and insisting that it “stands on the right side of history and the progress of human civilisation”.

The domestic manifestations of rigidity is evident in the Report’s lambasting of “bureaucratism, formalism”, cadres’ inaction and disengagement from the masses and so on. These are however old problems that have been plaguing the system for decades. Mao Zedong spent great efforts to eradicate them, even to the extent of mobilising the masses to tear down the mighty party-state establishment. Mao evidently understood that the root cause was centralisation of power and cadres’ losing touch with the masses. What the CPC is doing now is on one hand centralising power on a massive scale, and on the other fighting its inevitable consequences as if the two are unrelated.

The fourth negative effect is the deterioration of the political ecology. Some people may wonder, are the anti-corruption and “comprehensive and strict governance of the party” not all about improving the political ecology? Referred to here is a different type of ecological deterioration associated with power centralisation. Judging from the behaviour of official media, the monotonous tones and uniform voices of officials and representatives at the press conferences of the 20th Party Congress, we could expect in the next five years numerous waves of personality cult. In terms of policy effects, such political ecology leads to endless falsehoods, distorted information in decision-making and mass madness. The Great Leap Forward is but one of the many precedents in the history of modern China.

Therefore, Leninism of the 21st century can either add lustre to Leninism or sing the elegy for it. One of its greatest dangers is the stifling of the vitality and creativity of society as everything is designed by a “great leader” to the finer details, and everyone just needs to follow faithfully. Xi’s battle call of “empty talk misleads the country, hard work rejuvenates the nation” may well turn out to be everyone pretending to be “rolling up sleeves and working hard”, but in fact are making empty talks, with no one bold enough to break the news that the emperor is not wearing any clothes.

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