

CCP 20th Congress

The most powerful man in China since Mao: Xi Jinping is on the brink of total power

Sunday 16 October 2022, by [DAVIDSON Helen](#), [GRAHAM-HARRISON Emma](#) (Date first published: 15 October 2022).

The Communist party will this week confirm Xi as China's most powerful leader since Mao. What will his extended term of office mean for the country and for its neighbour Taiwan?

This week in Beijing, [Xi Jinping](#) will preside over one of his country's great shows of political theatre and seal a long-planned political triumph, consolidating his power and extending his rule.

The Chinese Communist party is poised to formally hand Xi another five years as party boss, and therefore leader of the country, at a summit that will also move his allies into key roles and elevate the status of his writings on power and government.

The [20th Party Congress](#) will – barring unprecedented last-minute drama – confirm him as the most powerful man in China since Mao Zedong, and probably enshrine him and his personal ideology in the party's constitution.

It is an uneasy precedent. After Mao's death, China's elite vowed never again to allow such concentration of power, and set up an unofficial system of collective leadership, term limits and a retirement age for high office. It facilitated smooth transfers of power – until Xi took over and swept those norms away.

The son of a vice-premier, one of the “red princeling” descendants of the communist elite, his gilded early childhood was upended by his father's fall from grace, then the violent upheaval of the Cultural Revolution.

As he manoeuvred his way towards ultimate power, many in China and beyond hoped he had inherited some of his father's relatively liberal outlook, and the scarring experiences of his early years might have inoculated him against totalitarianism.

Instead, early chaos seems to have instilled an overwhelming desire for stability and control above all else, along with an unshakable conviction that he is the best man to deliver it for all China.

Over 10 years as leader he has tightened his personal grip on the Communist party, and the party's grip on the country. He has weeded out rivals and enemies through anti-corruption purges, and cracked down on grassroots dissent by tightening censorship and surveillance.

Hong Kong, once a base for Beijing's critics, has lost its democratic freedoms of speech and assembly, after Xi ended its semi-autonomous status.

In Xinjiang on his watch, authorities have created a vast network of internment camps, with indefinite detention, torture and other abuses which the [UN says may amount to “crimes against](#)

[humanity](#)".

This week is the moment when he will cement his control over all of China. More than 2,000 delegates to the meeting will represent nearly 100 million party members, and formally make decisions about personnel and plans for the next half decade.

In reality they have been hand-picked to rubber-stamp Xi's new term, and endorse an agenda and a new senior leadership team largely settled in months of behind-the-scenes wrangling.

The government has locked down Beijing and [rounded up dissidents](#) to try to prevent the carefully choreographed meetings from being even slightly disrupted, although a lone protester did briefly manage to defy security controls, set a bridge ablaze and hang a protest banner.

Even if the outcome is all but a foregone conclusion, the show of power, and pretence at unity, are politically vital to Xi and the party he controls.

"You could say the congress is mainly theatre but it's not theatre alone, and it's terribly important," said Holly Snape, an expert in Chinese politics at the University of Glasgow. "It involves a massive amount of coordinated control.

"Even a powerful leader needs to garner 'consensus' (be it performed or genuine agreement) within the party. This is the moment when that 'consensus' – and therefore the 'legitimacy' of the leader inside the party – is confirmed and announced publicly."

The week will not only be an endorsement of Xi's continued rule, it is also moment when he will lay out his vision for China's future.

A speech at the opening of the congress, and a "work report" presented at the end – officially covering all Communist party efforts for the last five years and plans for the next half decade – will give vital insight into where he hopes to take the country he now controls so tightly.

Chinese elite politics is opaque and rare speeches like this offer a vital glimpse of where Xi hopes his country is headed.

One of his themes in recent years has been the "great rejuvenation" of China. As part of that he is likely to offer further efforts on the environment, particularly for balanced rural development, an economic shift away from real-estate development, and technology advancement.

It has also meant a more aggressive approach on the international stage, including abruptly ending Hong Kong's form of limited autonomy, militarising the South China Sea and [overtly threatening Taiwan](#). On the democratically ruled island, fears are rising that Beijing may be considering stepping back from a long-term commitment to "peaceful reunification".

"It is all but certain. Xi Jinping will serve three full terms at least," said Victor Shih, professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego.

"[Great rejuvenation] could be the main theme in the party congress which would of course have repercussions on the economy – China will have to keep growing and militarily it has to get stronger, it has to be an increasingly influential power in the world. So then one does wonder if there will be a change of wording with regards to [Taiwan](#)."

Xi's step into the history books with a third term comes at a challenging time. While his personal position has steadily strengthened over the last 10 years, China's fortunes have not followed such a

clear upward trajectory.

His consolidation of power came with a serious risk to already battered national finances, said Sung Wen-Ti, a political scientist at the Australian National University.

“Another five-year term of Xi will likely mean greater state control of China’s hybrid economy, and China’s continuation of [a] ‘scorched earth’-like approach to maintaining zero-Covid for significantly longer than other countries,” Sung said.

The economy has been already damaged by the global pandemic, and the international isolation caused by Xi’s personal commitment to keeping Covid out, even as other countries get used to living with the new disease.

It has also been snarled up by bureaucratic over-reach of a party seeking to bolster control, and undermined by the weakening of ties with a world once far more broadly dependent on Chinese factories and products.

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Beijing has made clear that centralisation and control will remain at the heart of policy in Xi’s “new era”, political concerns about Covid come ahead of economic growth, and Xi’s new policy team are unlikely to challenge him as much as the outgoing officials.

“At this juncture, the most likely new economic and finance policy-makers are going to be Xi’s proteges and often Xi’s former secretaries,” Sung said.

“They have relatively little independent power base outside of Xi’s patronage, and are therefore strongly incentivised to exhibit loyalty over independence, leading to a closed feedback-loop and a policy-making apparatus with weaker capacity for course-correction before disastrous policy consequences manifest.”

China is likely to remain sealed off from the world at the very least until next summer when it is scheduled to host the Asian Games. Some opening up would be needed for them to go ahead, with zero-Covid rules likely to put off coaches and athletes.

Analysts will be watching to see if Xi moves away from the language of past work reports, which promised to seek a peaceful resolution to the “Taiwan issue”. Leaving out the reference to seeking a peaceful past would be a clear signal that Xi is seriously considering bellicose options.

“The vocabulary deployed in the official speeches will be an important weather gauge on how Xi has hardened his stance on Taiwan,” said Alessio Patalano, professor of war and strategy in east Asia at King’s College London.

Bringing Taiwan back under Beijing’s control is “absolutely a personal matter” for the Chinese leader. Fujian province, where he spent the best part of two decades, lies just across the straits from Taiwan. There are business and personal links, and it is the physical frontline.

“His political background meant that as a national leader he approached reunification with Taiwan

with confidence. Today that confidence is a source of vulnerability as the prospect of peaceful reunification grows into question.”

Despite pouring huge amounts of money into modernising China’s military, foreign analysts believe it is not yet capable, in technical or strategic terms, [of seizing Taiwan by force](#). An amphibious landing on a well-protected island is among the most ambitious of military manoeuvres, that requires close coordination between air, land and sea assets.

But Beijing is approaching the moment when it may be possible. Earlier this year, the deputy director of the CIA, David Cohen, said that while China’s leaders – particularly Xi – would prefer a bloodless route to control of Taipei, they want the military to be capable of seizing Taiwan by 2027.

“It’s not good news if Xi can stay in power because he will definitely be more ambitious,” said Admiral Lee Hsi-Ming, the former head of the armed forces for Taiwan and its former deputy defence minister.

“He has already asserted his power, he will have a stronger intention to achieve the so-called great Chinese rejuvenation.”

Taiwan’s military and intelligence will not only be listening to Xi’s speech for clues about his plans for their island, but also parsing new appointments to the Central Military Commission.

Lee said those appointees’ “backgrounds and attitudes towards Taiwan” could signal Xi’s plans.

Recent Chinese military drills targeting Taiwan after [a visit by US speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi](#) were concerning. “They’re more assertive and confident about doing that kind of thing. Especially with some threats which we probably hadn’t focused on, like long range rocket systems ... You can see they’re more confident about the political mission,” he added.

Not everyone in the elite was happy about Xi’s hawkish stance on Taiwan, or absolutist approach to party control, but discontent was unlikely to spill over into the public eye this week, said Glasgow University’s Snape.

“The party regards ‘party discipline’ as paramount. Rules prevent any public expression of dissent or disagreement; the cost of even being perceived or painted as breaking the rules is too high.”

That doesn’t mean that Xi is guaranteed to rule for life if he wins another term, but his rise has left the party weaker. “One thing that is troubling inside the party is not just control on dissent, but the relative impoverishment of discussion,” Snape said. “There had been a real move towards greater policy debate and discussion inside the ruling elite, even if it remained an opaque process to those outside. Now toeing the line has become paramount.”

Emma Graham-Harrison and **Helen Davidson** in Taipei

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