# Xi Jinping, the chairman of everything – The rise of an all-powerful leader

Thursday 1 March 2018, by ALLISON Graham (Date first published: 4 December 2017).

**In his first essay for the *New Statesman*, one of the world's leading foreign policy experts explores the rise of an all-powerful leader.**

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At the Communist Party congress in Beijing in October, Xi Jinping was not only "elected" for a second five-year term as China's president. He was "crowned" as the 21st-century version of the emperors who ruled the country in earlier millennia. His "thoughts" were enshrined alongside Mao Zedong's in China's holy writ, the constitution, which must be studied and taken as guidance by the society. The membership of other major institutions of power – the seven-man standing committee, 25-man politburo and seven-man military commission – was reshuffled to ensure that all are now Xi loyalists. Most telling of all, the established practice of identifying a successor at the beginning of a leader's second term was abandoned. Conspicuously, the standing committee includes no plausible successor, signalling to China's 1.4 billion citizens the likelihood that Xi will remain their leader for as long as he chooses.

The first foreign dignitary to arrive in Beijing to pay respects to the newly empowered Xi was the president of the United States. Having developed the fine art of ritual over its 4,000-year history, China showed a certified American showman that it knows pomp and ceremony. As the New York Times explained before the trip, "The pomp will… be a chance for Mr Xi to showcase his 'China dream' – a vision of his nation joining or perhaps supplanting the United States as a superpower leading the world."

Prior to his departure, Donald Trump had sent Xi a note congratulating him on his "extraordinary elevation". To journalists, Trump called Xi "the king". Upon his arrival, he greeted Xi with respect that smacked of reverence, declaring, "You are a very special man," and "You're a strong man," and saluting him for leading his country forward, while blaming prior American leaders for allowing the US to get "so far behind".

As the *New York Times* summarised the visit: "President Trump projected an air of deference to China that was almost unheard of for a visiting American leader." Indeed, it went on: "Mr Trump's performance [suggests] a tipping point in great power politics."

Xi is now not only the most powerful leader of China since Mao. He is also the most ambitious leader of any country today. In the past five years, he has proved himself the most effective in advancing his nation's position in the world. And among all of the competitors on the international stage, he is

the most likely to leave a lasting mark on history.

To answer the question “Who is Xi Jinping?” it is useful to consider three Ss: survival, strategy and statecraft.

## Xi the survivor

Until his death in 2015, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s founder and prime minister, was the world’s premier China watcher. He was also a mentor to Xi Jinping. When Xi rose to power in 2012, Lee was the first foreign observer to say of this largely unknown technocrat, “Watch this man.” For the only time in half a century of assessing foreign leaders, Lee compared the new Chinese president to himself. Both men were shaped by trials that left deep grooves in their souls. For Lee, the “whole world” collapsed when Japan invaded Singapore in 1942. Similarly, Xi was schooled in his struggle to survive the madness of Mao’s Cultural Revolution. He emerged from the upheaval with what Lee called “iron in his soul”.

Xi was born a princeling of the revolution, the son of a trusted colleague of Mao, Vice-Premier Xi Zhongxun, who had fought alongside him in the Chinese Civil War, which began in 1927 and did not end until 1950. Destined to grow up in Beijing’s “cradle of leaders”, he awoke shortly after his ninth birthday in 1962 to discover that a paranoid Mao had arrested his father. In the days that followed, his father was humiliated and eventually imprisoned for the duration of the Cultural Revolution, which ended in 1976.

In what Xi has described as a “dystopian” nightmare, Red Guards repeatedly forced him to denounce his father. When his school closed, Xi spent his days defending himself in street fights and stealing books from shuttered libraries to try to educate himself. Sent to the countryside by Mao to be “re-educated”, Xi lived in a cave in a rural village in Yan’an, central China, shovelling dung and snapping to the demands of his peasant foreman. Depressed by deprivation and abuse, his elder half-sister, Xi Heping, hanged herself from a shower rail.

Instead of committing suicide, Xi embraced the reality of the situation and, in his apt word, he was “reborn”. As one of his long-time friends told a US diplomat, he “chose to survive by becoming redder than red” – doing whatever it took to claw his way back to the top.

## Xi the strategist

With assistance from former friends of his father, Xi managed to return to Beijing and enrol at the prestigious Tsinghua University, where he studied chemical engineering. After graduation in 1979, he took an entry-level staff job in the central military commission to begin building relations with the military.

To earn his political stripes, he then returned to the countryside for what Xi’s biographer Kerry Brown characterised as the “harsh and unglamorous political training” of a provincial official. But there he steadily worked his way up the hierarchy and, in 1997, won – just barely – a seat on the party’s central committee. (When the ballots for the 150 slots were counted, he came in 151$^{st}$. He was included only because the then party leader, Jiang Zemin, decided to make an exception and expand the membership to 151.)

When he was sent to be the party chief in the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang in 2002, Xi oversaw spectacular economic growth: exports increased 33 per cent annually in his four years in

office. He also proved adept at identifying and supporting promising local entrepreneurs, including Jack Ma, whose online retail business Alibaba is now a global titan that rivals Amazon.

While Xi demonstrated his skills as an administrator, he kept a low profile, avoiding the ostentatious displays of wealth common among many of his colleagues. When the names of potential future party leaders began circulating in 2005, his was not one of them.

But then, in early 2007, a high-level corruption scandal swept Shanghai. The Chinese president, Hu Jintao, and his colleagues on the politburo standing committee felt a desperate need to act quickly and decisively. Knowing of Xi's reputation for rectitude and discipline, they chose him to put out the fire. He did so with a combination of decisiveness and finesse that won the admiration of all his peers. By the summer of 2007, his name topped internal party lists of the most capable individuals likely to find a place in the next generation of leaders.

Xi was rewarded when the top 400 party leaders who composed the central committee (and alternates) met in October 2007 to select the then nine-man standing committee that would lead the nation for the next five years. He emerged not only as a member of the standing committee but also as the heir apparent to President Hu. As unassuming as he was ambitious, Xi had assiduously kept his head down as he climbed the party ladder, narrowly beating the favourite, Li Keqiang, to become next in line for the top spot. When the press first announced that Xi was Hu's likely successor, he was so unknown outside inner party ranks that a widely circulated joke asked, "Who is Xi Jinping?" The answer: "The husband of Peng Liyuan" – the famous folk singer to whom he is married.

After the madness of Mao, the party made a determined effort to protect the nation (and itself) against the tyranny of an autocrat by establishing a system of collective leadership. The nine members of the politburo standing committee were, in essence, equals, the president serving as the public spokesman for the group. The party elders who appointed Xi in 2012 assumed that he would be cut from the same cloth as his predecessor – an agreeable spokesman for the collective leadership. Little did they know.

Before the end of his first year in office, Xi had managed, in effect, a soft regime change. By the end of his first term, he had concentrated power in his own hands so completely that he is now often referred to not as China's CEO but as its COE: "chairman of everything". Conducting a highly visible anti-corruption campaign to masterful effect, Xi has purged powerful rivals previously considered untouchable, including the former head of China's internal security service, Zhou Yongkang – the first standing committee member ever to be prosecuted for corruption. In his consolidation of power, Xi has taken more than a dozen titles for himself, including chairman of a new national security council and commander in chief of the military, a title that even Mao was never given. And he has had himself anointed China's "core leader" – a term symbolic of his centrality to the state that Hu had allowed to lapse.

Most instructively, Xi was elevated to Mao's level when the recent party congress inscribed "Xi Jinping thought" into the party constitution. As the astute China watcher Bill Bishop told the Guardian, "It means Xi is effectively unassailable… If you challenge Xi, you are challenging the party – and you never want to be against the party."

## Xi's statecraft

Xi is using his power to pursue the most far-reaching transformation of China's political, economic and military systems since Mao. Externally, he has retired his predecessors' strategy of "hide our capacities and bide our time", choosing instead to assert China's power not just in the seas along its

border but around the world. At the recent party congress, he stated proudly that China would stand "tall and strong in the East".

In January, at the Davos gathering of business and political leaders from around the world, as the US withdrew from major trade agreements with Asia and Europe, Xi grasped the mantle as the champion of globalisation and free trade. At the meeting of 21 international leaders at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum in Vietnam in November, after Trump spoke bluntly about putting "America first", Xi urged those assembled to "uphold multilateralism, pursue shared growth through consultation and collaboration [and] forge closer partnerships".

Long before Donald Trump entered the political arena, Xi had announced his aspiration to "make China great again". In his words, he called for the "great rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation". For him, this means returning China to the predominance in Asia that it enjoyed before the West intruded; establishing control over the territories of "greater China", including not just Xinjiang and Tibet on the mainland but Hong Kong and Taiwan; and recovering its historical sphere of influence along its borders and in the adjacent seas, so that others give it the deference that great nations have always demanded. And it means commanding the respect of other great powers in the councils of the world.

Together, Xi calls these national goals the "China dream". Having painted a bold vision of the China dream, Xi is aggressively mobilising supporters to execute a hugely ambitious agenda advancing on four related fronts: revitalising the Communist Party, reviving Chinese nationalism, re-engineering a new economic revolution and reorganising and rebuilding China's military so that it can, as Xi says, "fight and win". Any one of these initiatives would be more than enough for most heads of state to attempt in a decade. Exuding what the China scholar Andrew Nathan has described as "Napoleonic self-confidence", Xi has chosen to address all four at once.

To convince the rest of the Chinese leadership and his fellow citizens that his China dream is not just rhetoric, Xi has flouted a cardinal rule of political survival: never state an unambiguous objective and a specific date in the same sentence. Within a month of becoming China's leader in 2012, Xi announced that China would build a "moderately prosperous society" (doubling the country's 2010 GDP per capita to around $10,000) by 2021, when it celebrates the 100$^{th}$ anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. On current trend lines, at that point, its economy will be 40 per cent larger than that of the United States (measured in terms of purchasing power parity), according to the International Monetary Fund.

At the recent party congress, Xi looked further, declaring that by the 100$^{th}$ anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 2049, China will become a "great modern socialist country that is prosperous" and "a global leader in terms of composite national power". If by mid-century China's per capita GDP matches the US, since its population is four times as large as the US, it will have a national economy four times the size of the US.

Moreover, in Xi's plan, economic supremacy is just the substructure of the dream. The American businessman Robert Lawrence Kuhn is one of the few Westerners with regular access to Xi's inner circle. When talking among themselves, Kuhn notes, Xi's team emphasises that being number one means being first not only in economic terms but also in defence, science, technology and culture. Xi's "Made in China 2025" initiative calls for China to be the global leader in key technologies including computing, robotics, artificial intelligence and self-driving cars. Making China great again is thus not just a matter of making it rich. Xi means to make it powerful, make it proud and make the party, as the primary driver for the entire venture, once again the worthy vanguard of the people.

China faces many severe challenges in its pursuit of this dream. And Xi and his team have shown

themselves to be ruthlessly realistic in recognising these challenges and addressing them. In Xi's view, a recalcitrant America is the principal obstacle to realising China's international ambitions. In 2014, the former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd and US national security adviser Brent Scowcroft each came back from separate, extensive conversations with Chinese leaders with identical views of what they call the striking "consensus" in the Chinese leadership. According to both statesmen, China's leaders are convinced that America's grand strategy for dealing with China involves five objectives: to isolate China, to contain China, to diminish China, to internally divide China and to sabotage China's leadership.

As Rudd explained, these convictions "derive from a Chinese conclusion that the US has not, and never will, accept the fundamental political legitimacy of the Chinese administration because it is not a liberal democracy". Moreover, according to Rudd, this is based on "a deeply held, deeply 'realist' Chinese conclusion that the US will never willingly concede its status as the pre-eminent regional and global power, and will do everything within its power to retain that position". Or, as Henry Kissinger says plainly, every Chinese leader he has met believes that America's strategy is to "contain" China.

As students of history, Chinese leaders recognise that the role the US has played since the Second World War as the architect and underwriter of regional stability and security has enabled the nations of Asia to rise, none more successfully than China. But they now believe that as the tide that brought the US to Asia recedes, America must leave with it. Much as Britain's role in the western hemisphere faded at the beginning of the 20th century, so must America's role in Asia as the region's historic superpower resumes its place. As Xi told a gathering of Eurasian leaders in 2014, "In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia."

The brute facts about China's rise are hard to deny. As I argue in my book, Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?, when there is such a fundamental shift in the underlying balance of power, alarm bells should sound: extreme danger ahead. The reason is "Thucydides's Trap": the dangerous dynamic that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one. Under these conditions, external events or actions by third parties that would otherwise be inconsequential or easily managed can trigger actions and reactions by the principal protagonists that end in a war that neither wanted. This phenomenon was first described by the great Greek historian Thucydides in his account of the Peloponnesian War, which devastated ancient Greece. As he explained: "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable."

The applied history project I direct at Harvard has found 16 cases in which a major nation's rise has disrupted the position of a dominant state over the past 500 years. Twelve ended in war. Remember 1914, when the assassination of an archduke sparked a fire that ended up burning down the houses of all the great states of Europe.

In this dynamic, the danger is real – but war is not inevitable. That war was averted in four of the 16 cases shows that the outcome is not preordained by some iron law of history. The point of invoking Thucydides's Trap is neither fatalism nor pessimism. Instead, it should awaken us to recognise the extreme risks created by the current conditions between the US and China. If both sides follow business as usual, we should expect history as usual. But as George Santayana taught us, only those who refuse to study history are condemned to repeat it.

Will Presidents Trump and Xi follow in the tragic footsteps of the leaders of Athens and Sparta, or Britain and Germany at the beginning of the last century? Or will they find a way to avoid war as effectively as the US and the Soviet Union did in the late 20th century? No one knows. We can be

certain, however, that the dynamic Thucydides identified will intensify in the years ahead.

## Where will Xi go from here?

At the party congress, Xi's three-and-a-half hour opening speech laid out in considerable detail the "work plan" for the next five years and beyond. While expressed in language that is sometimes difficult for Westerners to interpret, it offers clear pointers to the way ahead.

At home, expect the party to become more prominent; democracy – government by the people – no longer to require even lip service; GDP growth to slow a bit with more emphasis on quality of life, especially breathable air in big cities such as Beijing; and the guiding hand of Xi and party operatives who function as Leninist mandarins extending his reach to play an even larger role in governance.

Abroad, China will likely become more assertive in standing "tall and strong in the East", building islands and extending claims over the waters around it, and "moving to centre stage" in global affairs. Suggesting the terms of the accommodation to China's interests that he hopes he can persuade Trump to accept, Xi noted: "The Pacific Ocean is vast enough to accommodate both countries." Having pushed US aircraft carriers back beyond the first island chain that runs from Japan to the Philippines with an anti-ship missile programme, China is now extending those missiles' reach to nudge them back behind the second island chain. One suspects that Xi sees Hawaii as an appropriate midpoint at which to divide spheres of influence.

The Thucydidean dynamic between a rising China and a ruling America will now become more stressful, especially in what China regards as "its" neighbourhood and the seas that touch it shores. On the current path, it shall not be long before observers note similarities between the confident, exuberant Xi and Theodore Roosevelt as he led a US that rivalled and then surpassed Britain to claim an "American century". As Xi put it at the recent party congress: "History looks kindly on those with resolve, with drive and ambition, and with plenty of guts. It won't wait for the hesitant, the apathetic, or those shy of a challenge."

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## P.S.

* "why Chinese president Xi Jinping will change history". New Statesman. 4 DECEMBER 2017: https://www.newstatesman.com/world/asia/2017/12/chairman-everything-why-chinese-president-xi-jinping-will-change-history

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