

China's Communist party congress: everything you need to know

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On 16 October the upper echelons of China's ruling Communist party (CCP) will come together for a twice-a-decade gathering involving speeches, secret meetings, and reshuffles of powerful positions and committee memberships.

The 20th party congress is expected to see current leader Xi Jinping reappointed for a precedent-breaking third term, as well as offer signs of what he intends to do with his extra time in charge. The big questions are around key subordinate appointments, whether Xi is [given even greater standing within the party](#), what he plans to do about China's [zero-Covid ravaged economy](#) and his pledge to [take control of Taiwan](#).

What is the congress?

The congress is the most important meeting of the CCP's five-year political cycle. It announces new promotions and key appointments, including the party leader, passes assessment on the party's progress, and outlines the direction of the next cycle.

The meeting is always held in the autumn, and the [relatively early date](#) of this year's congress indicates that major decisions have been made, and any [potential disagreements or in-party rumblings](#) have been ironed out.

Who goes to the meeting?

About 2,300 senior party members gather at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, ostensibly representing the tens of million party members across China. Of those, there are 200 members of the elite central committee with voting rights, plus another 170 alternates. That committee is responsible for electing the 25-member politburo, of which the seven most powerful are appointed to the politburo standing committee (PSC).

"You make it on to the big committee and then the power flows to you," said Ryan Manuel, a Hong Kong-based expert on Chinese politics. Manuel said the reshuffle is much like a multinational announcing a mass of senior retirements and the elevation of junior employees to replace them, but with the new job titles held off until the National People's Congress (NPC) in March.

"After you've been bumped up in seniority you're given a new position to reflect your new status," Manuel said.

Everyone is ranked and Xi, as general secretary of the central committee, sits atop the pyramid. He also holds the title of chairman of the central military commission, and president of the People's Republic of China. The first two are up for renewal at the congress but the title of president – which carries the least power despite being the most commonly used internationally – will roll over at next year's NPC.

General secretary is the most important role, providing near total control of the CCP. There are a litany of other titles, some relating to specific power over various political and security bodies, and others are more symbolic. The 2016 bestowing of "core leader" elevated Xi to the [same level](#) as past leaders Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin.

This year analysts are watching out for one potential addition in particular – the resurrection of Mao's title of "party chairman". The return of the title would alter the CCP's power structure, but also create challenges, [as described by Dr Ling Li](#) of the University of Vienna.

What happens at the meeting?

The actual schedule of events is almost entirely behind closed doors. The previous congress [opened with a lengthy speech by Xi](#), outlining the CCP's successes and its priorities for the coming term.

"I do think the overall theme could be some overall notion of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," said Victor Shih, a politics professor at the University of California, San Diego. "That ... would of course have repercussions on the economy: [For this goal] China will have to keep growing, and militarily it has to get stronger, it has to be an increasingly influential power in the world."

Xi had likely hoped for total stability and positivity across China to set a perfect stage for the congress, but that wasn't to be. In his second term, Xi proclaimed the elimination of extreme poverty in China, launched massive interventions on the excesses of tech, development, and education industries, essentially [took control of Hong Kong](#), and kept the death toll from Covid-19 low. But the [economy is in trouble](#), and the social impacts of zero-Covid [have caused frustration](#). Last month's military drills around Taiwan also caused some domestic concern, despite general support for the "unification" of Taiwan.

"We know that [Xi Jinping](#) is extremely powerful, but this year has also shown that he has vulnerabilities," said Margaret Lewis, a law professor at Seton Hall University in the US.

After a week of private meetings Xi will probably give a closing address and present the new lineup of the PSC, the exact makeup of which is only revealed when they walk on stage.

Positions are usually vacated because either the member has been purged for misconduct or they are forced to retire under the party's age limit statute, which encourages members aged 68 and over at the time of congress to retire. Shih said there are likely to be at least two age-related retirements from the PSC – Li Zhanshu and Han Zhang, ranked third and seventh respectively.

Why is this meeting different?

Ordinarily, this meeting would see a smooth leadership transition as Xi stepped down at the end of his second term. But in 2018 the party suddenly announced those [constitutional limits had been scrapped](#), giving Xi the ability to be what some analysts termed "dictator for life".

It's the linchpin in what analysts say is Xi's consolidation of power, and reverses safeguards put in place by previous leaders to avoid repeating the cult of personality around Mao and the damage of his Cultural Revolution.

There has been no public opposition to the scrapping of term limits, or to Xi himself, and many of his potential opponents have been purged in the [vast anti-corruption drive](#) of recent years. For many analysts, like Council of Foreign Relations senior fellow Prof Carl Minzner, the question of whether he gets a third term is already a “dead certainty”.

“Instead, [the question] is how *far* he gets raised up politically. Does he get elevated to something closer to a Mao-like role in China’s political system, say by reviving the post of party chairman (abandoned since the early 1980s)?” said Minzner.

Minzner said anointing Xi as party chairman “would open the door for a broader disintegration of China’s political system back into full-blown one-man rule”.

“If that happens, it raises the spectre that all the abominable policy failures that inevitably accompany such a shift – whether those that China itself experienced under Mao during the Cultural Revolution, or that Russia today is witnessing under Putin – could repeat themselves.”

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P.S.

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