

China's leader Xi Jinping secures third term and stacks inner circle with loyalists

Sunday 23 October 2022, by [DAVIDSON Helen](#), [GRAHAM-HARRISON Emma](#), [YU Verna](#) (Date first published: 23 October 2022).

Xi unveiled as general secretary of ruling Communist Party, tilting China back towards one-man rule after decades of power-sharing among elite

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Xi Jinping has been confirmed as leader of China for a precedent-breaking third term, after a week-long political meeting eliminated key rivals and strengthened his political power.

The 20th Party Congress, the most important meeting of the ruling Chinese Communist party five-year political cycle, saw about 2,400 delegates gather in Beijing to rubber-stamp major reshuffles and constitutional changes before its official close on Saturday.

At a press event on Sunday, seven key Xi loyalists were revealed as members of China's most powerful political body, the politburo standing committee (PSC), as they walked on stage in order of rank.

"I was reelected as the general secretary of the CPC central committee," Xi said in opening remarks, before presenting the six other members: Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang, and Li Xi.

At the lead was Xi, confirming his reappointment as general secretary of the party for a third term. The long-speculated reappointment signalled Xi's successful and overwhelming consolidation of power in Beijing, with retention of the role as chair of the military commission, controlling the People's Liberation Army. It's expected he will next year regain the less powerful title of president.

As the second-ranked member after Xi, Li Qiang, the party secretary of Shanghai, is likely to be appointed the next premier when Li Keqiang steps down from premiership in March after two terms.

Shanghai has historically been a breeding ground for top national leaders. While Li's prospects might have been dented by the chaos of Shanghai's protracted Covid lockdown, analysts say Xi values loyalty and trustworthiness above all, and Li's strong rapport with Xi over the years has put him in good stead. Li was Xi's chief of staff from 2004 to 2007 when Xi was Zhejiang province's top party boss.

The relatively surprising inclusion of Cai Qi was a sign of how Xi values both loyalists and people he knew rising up through the ranks. Like Xi, Cai spent many years in Fujian province at the start of his career, and moved on to Zhejiang. More recently he oversaw the 2022 winter Olympics, and has been a prominent champion of the zero-Covid policy embraced by Xi, indicating that is here to stay

for now.

The Standing Committee was formally selected by the powerful politburo, also revealed on Sunday. For the first time in 25 years the new politburo contains no women members where previously there was one, vice-premier Sun Chunlan, and has reduced in number to 24 from 25.

Willy Lam, a senior fellow at Jamestown Foundation, a Washington-based think tank said this week's Congress had shown that "the personality cult surrounding Xi will exacerbate".

"The party and country risk becoming a 'one-voice chamber' where only one voice will be heard. The supreme leader has almost totally abandoned the institutional reforms started by Deng Xiaoping and largely followed by ex-presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao," he said.

In his short speech on Sunday, Xi said China must remain on high alert for challenges "like a student sitting for a never-ending exam", repeating earlier warnings of "choppy waters" and "dangerous storms" on the horizon.

The language is heightened compared to previous Congresses, which were more focused on peace and development, and reflect how much more isolated China has become from the west, with numerous disputes and tensions. But he emphasises a need to keep relationships open.

"China's development can't leave the world and the world's development also needs [China](#)," he said.

In 2018 Xi spearheaded the abolition of term limits on leaders, paving the way for him to become leader for life. Massive anti-corruption purges during his tenure, and this week's political reshuffles have ensured there is little, if any, opposition remaining.

A list of delegates appointed to the 205-member central committee on Saturday revealed some of the most senior rivals to Xi, with links to other factions in the party and their own power base, had been shuffled into retirement.

[Resolutions announced on Saturday](#) revealed constitutional changes enshrining Xi the individual and his political thought as the core of the CCP and its ideology, raising concerns of a growing Maoist "cult of personality" around Xi.

Separate amendments cemented Beijing's more aggressive stance on Taiwan in the party's constitution. Where it previously listed Taiwan alongside Hong Kong and Macau as a place with which to "build solidarity". It now only swears to "resolutely oppose and constrain Taiwan independence".

Helen Davidson, Emma Graham-Harrison and Verna Yu

Who's who in Xi Jinping's China as leader cements power

An introduction to the loyal Xi acolytes on the Politburo Standing Committee who will now shape Xi's vision for China

China's leader, Xi Jinping, claimed his third term in power this weekend, and swept men from rival

factions out of the Politburo Standing Committee, the seven-strong nucleus of political power in China

It is now packed with men – there has never been a woman on the PSC – who are loyal Xi acolytes, in what one analyst described as “maximum Xi”.

They range from a friend with ties to the Xi family going back decades to more recent aides who proved their commitment as he consolidated power over the years, and the hardline ideologue who is his chief political theorist.

In the wake of Mao’s death, the Chinese Communist party (CCP) tried to normalise a collective leadership, that made the general secretary of the party a kind of “first among equals” on the PSC.

That era is over. However, the PSC members still wield immense power and will be key in shaping and implementing Xi’s vision for China and the CCP.

Below are brief introductions to these seven men. New entrants to the politburo have a star (*) by their name

Politburo Standing Committee

Xi Jinping, 69

Xi took charge of the Communist party, and so of China, in late 2012. He has used this week to cement his power, and remove all political rivals from the Politburo Standing Committee. He has been given another five years in power, and is likely to stay on beyond that. He his positions as general secretary of the Chinese Communist party and chairman of the central military commission were renewed at the party congress. His position as president of the People’s Republic of China will almost certainly be renewed at the rubberstamp parliament, the National People’s Congress, next March.

*** Li Qiang, 63**

Li Qiang, a close Xi ally, is party secretary of Shanghai, which has historically been a training ground for top national leaders. He is expected to be the next premier when Li Keqiang – now out of the Standing Committee and headed for retirement – steps down from the premiership in March.

Li presided over the disastrous Shanghai Covid lockdown at the start of this year, doubling down on the “zero Covid” approach favoured by Xi despite a heavy economic and human cost. His elevation has widely been taken as a sign that Xi values loyalty, and familiar faces, over competence.

From 2004 to 2007, when Xi was Zhejiang province’s top party boss, Li was his chief of staff. After Xi became China’s top leader, he promoted Li first to governor of Zhejiang and then party secretary of Jiangsu province, providing him with the regional governing experience and credentials he needed for bigger roles.

Zhao Leji, 65

Zhao Leji has his roots in two impoverished western provinces – Shaanxi, his ancestral home, and Qinghai, where in 2000 he became the youngest provincial governor in the country.

He has been head of the party’s top anti-corruption watchdog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, a key instrument in Xi’s strengthening CCP and personal control.

He also headed the party’s powerful Organisation Department, overseeing the appointment of all senior officials across China. He used that post to show his loyalty, placing Xi’s allies into important

positions across the country during the past decade.

Wang Huning, 67

A key Xi ally, Wang is rare among senior communist cadres in having no administrative experience running a province or major city. Instead he is Xi's political theorist, his closest adviser on ideology, propaganda and foreign policy.

A former academic known for his theories on "neo-authoritarianism", Wang advocated a strong, centralised state to counter foreign influence. Helpfully for Xi, he also believes in strong central leadership, rejecting the collective leadership introduced after Mao Zedong's death in an effort to avoid repeating the excesses of that era.

His official positions include serving as director of the central policy research office (CPRO) from 2002 to 2020.

*** Cai Qi, 66**

Cai Qi, Beijing party secretary, was the surprise entry to the PSC. He featured on some long-lists of potential candidates, but had not been widely tipped for the top.

His entry is another sign of how Xi values both loyalists and people he knew rising up through the ranks. Born in Fujian, the eastern coastal province that would shape Xi's early career, Cai spent the start of his working life there. He moved on to nearby Zhejiang province, where Xi served as governor, before being put in charge of Beijing in 2017.

He has been a prominent champion of the Zero Covid policy embraced by Xi, and successfully oversaw the 2022 winter Olympics.

*** Ding Xuexiang, 60**

Ding Xuexiang is an old and trusted ally of China's leader. He served as Xi's political secretary when he was Shanghai party chief in 2007 and rose with him to become private secretary and gatekeeper when Xi took over the country.

He studied mechanical engineering and began his career as a researcher at the Shanghai Research Institute of Materials, before moving into party roles full time.

Ding's behind-the-scenes roles mean he has an even lower public profile than China's other leaders, even though the CCP is generally secretive about senior figures.

He is the youngest member of the standing committee and at 60, the only one who would be eligible under the old rules to serve another term in 2027. However, Xi has already ripped up norms on retirement age, so others could potentially stay on too.

*** Li Xi, 66**

Li Xi is long-standing member of Xi's inner circle. The two men have known each other, and reportedly been family friends, since the early 1980s when Li worked for a party veteran who was close to Xi's father.

He has risen steadily in the party through positions across China, in Shaanxi, Shanghai and Liaoning provinces. He originally studied Chinese language and literature, but more recently did an MBA at Tsinghua University.

He is now party chief of affluent Guangdong province. There he is responsible for the development of the Greater Bay Area, Xi's masterplan for an economic powerhouse that integrates nine Chinese

cities with Hong Kong and Macau.

Verna Yu and Emma Graham-Harrison in Taipei

• The Guardian. Sun 23 Oct 2022 09.47 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/23/whos-who-in-xi-jinping-china-as-leader-cements-power>

In Mao's footsteps: Xi Jinping puts himself at core of China's government

President would normally step down now after 10 years as leader, but he has abolished term limits and promoted his allies

Xi Jinping has eliminated key rivals from China's leadership and consolidated his grip on the country on the final day of a Communist party meeting at which former [president Hu Jintao was led away unexpectedly from the main stage](#). Hu's departure was a rare moment of unscripted drama in what is usually carefully choreographed political theatre.

The closing session of the 20th congress of the Chinese Communist party (CCP) ended a weekend of triumph for Xi that makes him China's most powerful ruler since Mao Zedong. He has swept away the last norms of a political order built since Mao's death to prevent a return to the worst excesses of rule by a single autocrat.

On Saturday, it became clear that Xi had shuffled premier Li Keqiang and reformer Wang Yang into retirement, so he could pack the politburo standing committee – the heart of government, which had for decades ruled collectively – with loyalists. On Sunday, Xi's third term as head of the CCP, and therefore leader of China, will be officially announced, after years of speculation. He will get a third term as president early next year.

The week-long meeting was planned with precision and paranoia, and Xi emphasised party unity throughout. But the desire to control the party's public image made the sudden and apparently unwilling departure of Hu, in front of the world's media, particularly surprising.

The 79-year-old seemed confused and reluctant to leave his seat on stage at the Great Hall of the People when he was approached by an aide or official, who whispered in his ear and tried to lift him from his seat. At one point Hu tried to pick up Xi's notes, which lay on the table between them. Xi reached out to hold the papers down. Hu was then escorted from the stage, sparking speculation over whether the departure arose from health problems, or was power politics played out for a CCP or international audience.

Whatever the reason, it carried symbolic weight. The other living former leader, Jiang Zemin, is now 96 and had not appeared at the congress.

Xi has used the gathering to cement his position in the CCP and bolster his personality cult by making his writing the "core" of modern party ideology. Once Hu had been escorted out, Xi was pre-eminent on the stage, as he now is in Chinese politics. The congress, the most important gathering of China's five-year political cycle, brings 2,400 delegates from all over the country together to

rubber-stamp decisions taken by the party elite.

Under the old norms, Xi would have been stepping down as leader this week after 10 years at the helm. Instead he abolished term limits on the presidency, is packing the government with allies, and could potentially become leader for life.

A central committee, politburo and standing committee all dominated by Xi will mean a significant loss of checks and balances

Willy Lam, Jamestown Foundation

Any remaining senior officials who oppose Xi are unlikely to risk speaking out against him now, analysts say. In several of his speeches, the president talked about China having to navigate an increasingly hostile world. In his closing address, Xi told delegates: “Dare to struggle, dare to win, bury your heads and work hard. Be determined to keep forging ahead.”

His vision for China suggests more repression at home, more state interference in the economy – even though this has hampered growth – and aggression abroad.

Changes to the CCP’s constitution approved on Saturday make Xi’s writings – the snappily named [Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era](#) – an underpinning for party ideology, with Xi himself at the “core” of the party.

A list of delegates appointed to the 205-member central committee also revealed that some of the most senior rivals to Xi – who had links to other factions in the party and their own powerbase – had been forced into retirement.

The 25-member politburo, and its all-powerful standing committee, are drawn from central committee members. Officials cannot join the powerful ruling organisations if they are not on the central committee. Those missing included premier Li Keqiang and Wang Yang, who heads the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Li had been expected to retire from the premiership next March, but there has been speculation he would stay in the CCP leadership with a less high-profile role.

Wang, a pro-reform politician with a relatively liberal image and rich regional experience, was previously seen by analysts as a likely candidate for the next premiership.

“A central committee, politburo and standing committee all dominated by Xi would mean a significant loss of checks and balances,” said Willy Lam, senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, a thinktank based in Washington. “Xi’s policy of putting ideology and national security over economic development will continue for the coming five or even 10 years, as he is eager to rule until the 22nd party congress in 2032, when he will be 79.”

Other constitutional amendments significantly toughened China’s stance on [Taiwan](#). The CCP charter previously listed Taiwan alongside Hong Kong and Macau as a place with which it hoped to “build solidarity”. It now only swears to “resolutely oppose and constrain Taiwan independence”.

“Beijing is signalling that it is digging its heels deeper into the ground on no room for compromise on the Taiwan issue,” said Sung Wen-ti, a political scientist at the Australian National University.

Helen Davidson and Emma Graham-Harrison in Taipei, **Verna Yu**

- The Observer. The Guardian. Sun 23 Oct 2022 07.00 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/23/xi-follows-maos-footsteps-puts-himself-at-core-of-chinas-government>
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