

# China's "New Era" and "Xi Jinping Thought"

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As the Chinese Communist Party's 19th National Congress opened on October 18, General Secretary Xi Jinping's work report announced the advent of a "new era," a "strategic opportunity" for China to reassert its greatness on the world stage and to be a role model for developing countries. With Xi himself as its leadership core, the Communist Party would guide China's return to its central place among nations, while strengthening the party's internal discipline and further tightening its control over all aspects of Chinese society and the domestic economy. In a unanimous vote before it adjourned on October 24, the congress approved Xi's report as the party's formal mandate and enshrined "Xi Jinping Thought" in the party constitution. That canonization gives Xi an authority unmatched by any Chinese leader since Mao Zedong. What Xi Jinping Thought might mean and how it might guide China's future will be addressed in this essay.

## People, Policy, and the Xi Jinping Era

Chinese Communist Party national congresses, held twice a decade, have two focal points: people and policy. The people—the men whom the 19th Congress will appoint as the party leaders—will be announced after the meeting adjourns on October 24. While there is no doubt that General Secretary Xi will be named

to a second five-year term, there is intense speculation about who will flank him in the party's top echelon, the Politburo and its Standing Committee.<sup>1</sup>

About party policy, however, we need speculate no longer. In a three and a half hour speech opening the congress on October 18, Xi enunciated nothing less than his vision for China's future, as in party parlance he was delivering the work report of the outgoing 18th Central Committee. Xi's address recounted the myriad achievements of his own five-year tenure as general secretary and announced that China had "crossed the threshold into a new era." This new era, Xi intoned in his broadcaster's baritone, will be defined by "The Thought on Developing Socialism with Chinese Characteristics."

Months in the drafting and exhaustively studied by the approximately 2,300 delegates, this report was

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of the major questions heading into the 19th Congress, see Nadège Rolland, "China's 19th Party Congress: 'Tis the Season for Reading the Tea Leaves," National Bureau of Asian Research, Commentary, October 12, 2017, [http://nbr.org/downloads/pdfs/psa/rolland\\_commentary\\_101217.pdf](http://nbr.org/downloads/pdfs/psa/rolland_commentary_101217.pdf).

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unanimously approved by the congress and will now be promulgated through an elaborate hierarchy to the party's 90 million members. The report will become "the party line" to guide all aspects of members' work in government and foreign affairs, the military, police and the courts, academia, the media, and throughout Chinese society. The party line is a line that cadres cross at their peril.

The party's authoritative megaphone, the *People's Daily*, trumpeted Xi's work report in the bold red headlines reserved for events of utmost importance. And by October 19, the day after Xi spoke, party media carried accounts of all seven current Politburo Standing Committee members—the men who sit at the apex of power—lauding Xi's vision and labeling it "Xi Jinping Thought." Such paeans, plus the Politburo's September announcement that the party constitution would be amended at the 19th Congress, foretold that Xi Jinping Thought would enter the Chinese Communist canon, alongside "Mao Zedong Thought" and the liturgically lesser "Deng Xiaoping Theory." The reputed theoretical contributions of Xi's two immediate predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, were enshrined in the party constitution only as they were leaving office, and in neither case were their contributions made eponymous.

That Xi Jinping Thought will now stand alongside Mao Zedong Thought in the party's creed bespeaks the formidable power that Xi has accumulated since he became general secretary in 2012. Xi has shown himself a leader qualitatively different from both Jiang and Hu, a man with the sense of entitlement bestowed by his Communist pedigree, given to carry himself with a regal bearing that impresses foreigners and that Chinese admire, and prepared to dispatch rivals with an iron fist.

## What Is Xi Jinping Thought?

Xi's "Thought" is not the collection of pithy aphorisms, political philosophizing, revolutionary warfighting tactics, and even poetry that make Mao's legacy. Rather, Xi Jinping Thought appears to

be an amalgam of the man himself and his style of leadership as percolated through the party dogma and old-fashioned ideals on which he was raised. Scion of one of the founders of the People's Republic of China (PRC), a man whom Mao purged in 1962, Xi has had little formal education beyond middle school and prides himself on having learned life's most important lessons from the Chinese farmers among whom he dwelt during his adolescence and early manhood. Some of his official biography is hagiography, to be sure; but Xi's efforts to resuscitate the Communists' altruistic, nation-building values of the 1950s seem genuine, in stemming both from his own formative experience and from his apparent belief in these values as the moral fiber that, if observed, will allow the party to stay in power.

These values and practices do not form a coherent intellectual corpus, although Xi and his acolytes have several times summarized them in published collections of his "important speeches" (he makes no unimportant speeches) and his tome *Governing China*, which has been made required reading in party cells. Xi Jinping Thought remains very much a work in progress, albeit without the folksy pragmatism of Deng Xiaoping's "feeling the stones while fording the river." No wonder Xi needed a three and a half hour speech last Thursday to communicate his thoughts about China's recent past and its near future. Pity the party's wordsmiths charged with drafting such a verbose oration. For a foreign reader, Xi's work report means painful exegesis, as one plows through the thicket of party jargon, obscure allusion, and code words. (The official Chinese text runs to 30,000 characters, while the English-language version, distributed to foreign journalists auditing Xi's speech but since deleted from the Chinese intranet, ran to some 65 pages.)

## The Message in the Medium

For all its prolixity and cliché, however, Xi's October 18 work report should be understood as a rough roadmap for China's next five years—the span

of the 19th Central Committee—and, as Xi exerts his influence further into the future, perhaps even to the PRC’s centenary in 2049. Xi repeatedly used such distant dates as targets in his work report, suggesting an early start at building his legacy. Foreign political leaders and policy planners, investors, and others who must deal with China day-to-day should take the report as an authoritative forecast of what to expect in “the Xi Jinping era.” Several points deserve special mention.

*Party building.* “Party building” ran as a bright red thread throughout the work report and was highlighted in a discrete section. The party’s strength, legitimacy, and ability to continue to rule China and its members’ loyalty to him are existential matters for Xi. Hence, party building lies at the heart of his vision for China and the policies that flow from that vision. The term means strengthening internal party discipline, not only on ethical matters such as excising extortion, bribery, the sale of public office, and other practices targeted in Xi’s “anticorruption” campaign, but also through inculcating the abstemious lifestyle promoted by Xi himself. Equally important, the term means maintaining ideological orthodoxy, hewing to the party line laid out in the work report, and showing fealty to Xi himself as the “core” of the party leadership. The prominence of party building in Xi Jinping Thought presages continuing rounds of political campaigns throughout the party’s 90-million-strong membership, campaigns that will preoccupy bureaucrats and distract them from their government jobs. Investors waiting on a business license or other government approval should be prepared to wait a bit longer when campaigns are underway.

*The new contradiction.* Marxist theory thrives on “contradictions.” For Xi, “the principal contradiction facing Chinese society has evolved...and is now the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life.” From this expression in his work report, Xi derived more strenuous efforts to eradicate completely poverty in the coming decade, which would imply more infrastructure building to link poor and remote areas to urban centers, as well as upgrades

to the national education and public health systems. Solving this new contradiction also means a serious, sustained program to curtail environmental pollution and to remediate China’s degraded waters, air, and land. Over the past year, Xi has launched a precursor to a more comprehensive environmental protection program, modeled on his anticorruption campaign and punishing officials who despoil local ecologies. In parallel, his so-called supply-side reforms aim to reduce excess industrial capacity—most notably in metals smelting and coal mining—and those measures will continue. Also to continue will be state support for alternative energies, electric vehicles, water and air treatment technologies, and the like. State-directed overseas acquisitions (and less overt means) will aim to capture foreign technologies in those fields. If past be prologue, Chinese state subsidies will yield a glut of new environmentally friendly products that will soon seek foreign markets.

*Party control.* For macroeconomic policies in the Xi Jinping era, investors should expect continuing efforts to control outcomes through planning, regulation, and party dominance of heavy industry, transportation, communications, financial services, and all sectors deemed key to national security. Over the past two years Xi has moved aggressively to consolidate and recapitalize the major state-owned enterprises and to restructure their managements to ensure absolute party control of these mastodons. While in his address to the 19th Congress, Xi gave lip service to “market forces playing a decisive role in the allocation of resources,” his far heavier emphases lay on favoring the public sector, for therein lie the party-state’s crown jewels. In his first five-year term, private companies in “new economy” areas such as ecommerce and its logistics backbones have flourished, creating millions of jobs at low-skill levels; however, private firms in traditional industries have fared less well due to state-mandated wage increases, state bank lending policies, and other forms of government interference in the economy. Moreover, control, that most prominent gene in the party’s DNA, stands always ready to assert itself, as in recently announced plans for the party-state to take

equity shares in China's big-name listed intranet and ecommerce firms.

*A new era.* If Xi's "new era" looks a bit like old eras on the Chinese home front, the world outside China will confront a challenging novelty: an ever-more assertive, self-confident, even arrogant power for as long as Xi remains on the throne. His speech to the 19th Party Congress proclaimed "a new historic juncture in China's development...an era that sees China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind." Not only will Xi and the party he leads return China to its primacy as the Central Kingdom; they will "offer Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind." Far beyond promoting a Chinese paradigm for economic development, Xi has announced a veritable "civilizing mission" to compete in the world arena of philosophies of governance. This is a statement without precedent from any of his predecessors, save perhaps Mao in his heyday of exporting revolution, and it really does, as

Xi said repeatedly in his work report, signal that China "has crossed a threshold into a new era." As Xi's China builds its parallel universe of institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, to give form to its *mission civilisatrice*, foreign political leaders and policy planners will face complexities that few would have imagined just a decade ago.

At home and abroad, Xi in his second term aims to realize his "China dream" and the "great revival of the Chinese race," tropes that he has favored from his first days in power and that might well help him extend his reign beyond the Communist Party's centenary in 2021 and place him in the party pantheon. When the 19th Congress ends, observers will scrutinize most closely the new Politburo Standing Committee for whether it includes an heir apparent. If no successor, obvious by rank or age, appears alongside General Secretary Xi, one almost inescapable conclusion will be that Xi intends to succeed himself. ~

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