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Image credit : Xi Jinping pictured with members of the new Politburo Standing Committee on Sunday. Photo: Reuters

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The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China: Linkages, real and imagined.

David S G Goodman

Conceptually, linkages are one very useful filter for understanding the recent process of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China [CCP] and its potential consequences, though possibly more effectively in the less obvious ways. The most obvious series of linkages would seem to be found in the appointment of the CCP's new leadership, announced the day after the closure of the Congress on 23rd October 2022. The more useful linkages for understanding the messages of the Congress are though to be found in consideration of the various social groups and interests being targeted by the CCP's leadership, and the ideological configurations presented as key relationships in both Xi Jinping's Work Report to the Congress on 16 October (Xi Jinping 2022) and the Amendments to the CCP Constitution adopted on 22 October (CCP Congress 2022).

Leadership changes

The unveiling of the new Politburo and its Standing Committee has been greeted both within and outside the People's Republic of China [PRC] as confirmation that Xi Jinping, his like-minded colleagues and supporters are now firmly in control. Of course, leadership selection, and personal appointments generally in the PRC occur within the blackest of black boxes. All the same, many commentators have suggested that Xi Jinping has forsaken the previous rules of engagement within the leadership of the CCP by ensuring that the Politburo members are now disproportionately from only those in the Party leadership with whom he has personal and political linkages, and are not now in some sense representative of other groups in the CCP as was presumably assumed to be the case (Palmer 2022; Tsoi and Chang 2022). One estimate is that 20 of the 24 Politburo members are linked closely to Xi Jinping, usually through one or more of shared party and state experience, encounters in education, and social background (McCahill 2022).

An extreme example of the ease with which this kind of explanation was accepted is provided by two comparative photographs circulated widely together on social media within China at the time of the congress. The first showed four young men together in a group including Xi Jinping from the mid-1970s. The photograph was said to be from Tsinghua University when Xi Jinping first was enrolled as a 'worker-peasant-soldier' student studying engineering. The second indicated how each of these four had achieved senior leadership positions on the Politburo Standing Committee of the 19th CCP Central Committee (from 2017). Alongside Xi, the other three were identified (incorrectly) as Wang Huning and Zhao Leji (continuing on the 20th CCP Politburo Standing Committee) and Li Zhanshu (retiring in 2022 after a stint on the Politburo.) In the event it seems that the 1970s photograph is from earlier years when Xi was one of those 'sent down to the countryside' in line with then national policy to 'learn from the poor and lower middle peasants'. In this case Xi was in rural Shaanxi, along with three others who were not as identified in the 2022 social media post but were nonetheless the sons of senior army commanders who later had successful

careers, including one who became President of the Central Party School. In any case, none of Wang Huning, Zhao Leji, or Li Zhanshu were sent down to the countryside in Shaanxi, and none were educated at Tsinghua University.



Incorrectly attributed photographs of Xi Jinping and colleagues, Social Media October 2022

The observations about personal personnel appointments would also certainly seem to be reinforced by stories about this year's selection process for the CCP Central Committee and other appointments circulating in PRC media as well as overseas, where Xi Jinping's role alongside other senior leaders has been emphasised (*Xinhua* 2022; *China Daily* 2022). Moreover, there is certainly much to be made of any argument that suggests Xi Jinping and some of his generation of CCP leaders are the children of older revolutionaries; and that generally speaking connections are made, and sound relationships formed through careers in the Party-state. Indeed, it would be considerably more surprising if that were not the case as promotions occurred and careers developed after the Cultural Revolution. Xi Jinping may well be in far stronger control of the leadership and the CCP than he was before the 20th Party Congress. At the same time, shared experiences do not inevitably mean shared ideas, and shared ideas do not always lead to shared political action, especially consistently in the longer term. Other experiences of similar situations would suggest that the kind of extreme leadership unity being ascribed to the current Politburo and its Standing Committee is not a given, and there is a clear argument that a monopoly of political appointments itself may lead eventually to emerging differences (Wu Guoguang 2022b).

On the other hand, Xi Jinping and his colleagues may well have engineered a higher degree of conformity than in the past because of their perspectives of the scale and difficulty of the tasks ahead. As Xi Jinping's Report to the 20th Congress outlines these include not only a series of bold future policy goals but also barely veiled criticism of past political and

economic practices requiring improvement. While this includes the corruption of officials able to take advantage of weak regulation of all kinds in a growing economy (which has often stolen the headlines in the past few years) that is an epiphenomenal tip of the iceberg. Economic and political elites have become used to behaving in other more previously acceptable ways (Xu and Wu 2021) that are now signalled as having to change if economic growth and common prosperity, as well as Party ideological and infrastructural improvement are to be achieved as outlined at the Congress. To those ends the leadership appears to have decided that they need to control the reins of power more forcefully than has been the case in the recent past, when there have been elements of resistance (as with the attempted development of the property tax) (Zhang and Jing 2020); problems from institutional distortion differentials that accompany the nascent dual economy (Zhou Tianyong 2021); or pressures for an even more liberal economic environment (Leutert 2016). As many commentators have observed, at stake in the leadership's view would seem to be not just stability and economic growth but the very existence of the CCP as a ruling party, challenged by both a loss of control and the expected consequences of that loss (Magnier 2022; Tian and Pollard 2022; Wu Guoguang 2022a).

Social Appeals

While the process of leadership appointments and interactions may remain opaque the message of the 20th CCP Congress is very clear: only the CCP can deliver a prosperous, stable, and sustainable glorious future. This message is delivered by carefully articulated and varied appeals to different sections of China's society, and by grounding legitimacy in a range of different equations. While the overall rallying cry, in the words of the congress resolution on adopting changes to the CCP Constitution is that 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era is the Marxism of contemporary China and of the 21st century and embodies the best Chinese culture and ethos of this era' (CCP Central Committee 2022) appeals and legitimation are more specific.

Despite the criticisms of lower (administrative) level cadres contained in Xi Jinping's Work Report, much of the Congress's discussion was directed at appreciating the commitment of CCP members. They were urged to support the 'struggle' ahead, and the need for them to 'persevere' was the second most common word cited in Xi's Work Report by some margin after only mention of the 'Party' (Kline 2022). Alongside the Party membership, the embrace of all the people of China was absolute: 'all power of the state in China belongs to the people.' Moreover, the well-publicised (and much repeated in the Work Report) policy goal of Common Prosperity is clearly directed at the less advantaged members of society:

'The immutable goal of our modernization drive is to meet the people's aspirations for a better life. We will endeavour to maintain and promote social fairness and justice, bring prosperity to all, and prevent polarization.'

On the other hand, for entrepreneurs there is no suggestion of not being committed to continued economic growth and technical innovation, though the 'new pattern of development' referred to in the Work Report certainly entails that the CCP

'must uphold and improve China's basic socialist economic system. We must unwaveringly consolidate and develop the public sector and unwaveringly encourage, support, and guide the

development of the non-public sector. We will work to see that the market plays the decisive role in resource allocation and that the government better plays its role.'

Nationalists were left in no doubt that the CCP was committed to 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts' including not just modernisation (and its consequences) but also territorial integrity (long a goal of the PRC). In particular, presumably in the wake of Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, there was now an emphasis in both Xi's Work Report and in the Preamble to the CCP Constitution to explicitly oppose attempts to create an independent Taiwan. The Work Report provided considerable acknowledgment of the role of the military in 'building a modern socialist country in all respects' and committed the CCP to developing military capabilities and 'a strong system of strategic deterrence', recognizing that in the recent past there had been 'Many shortcomings ... affecting the modernization of national defense and the military.' There was even an appeal to the less-developed countries of the world. There were statements recognizing the emergence of a more uncertain international environment, and criticisms of

'hegemonic, high-handed, and bullying acts of using strength to intimidate the weak, taking from others by force and subterfuge' and explicitly 'In pursuing modernization, China will not tread the old path of war, colonization, and plunder taken by some countries.'

Roots of legitimacy

More interesting perhaps are the continued development in Xi Jinping's Work Report of linkages to the legitimacy of the CCP not just in general terms but also in three distinct if interrelated directions: in relation to Marxism and socialism; in terms of what is called 'traditional' Chinese culture; and towards what is described as 'whole-process people's democracy'. Central to all three is the role of the CCP which alone is presented as being able to guarantee the domestic and international goals of national rejuvenation, set for realisation by 2049. This in part explains the current leadership's linkage to Mao Zedong. It is certainly not the case that sometimes contrary to appearances Xi Jinping seems to channel Chairman Mao but rather that Mao Zedong represents a large part of the history of the CCP and its role in China. Those parts of Mao's legacy associated with class conflict and the phenomenon of mass campaigns, as during the Cultural Revolution are no longer part of the CCP's worldview (Zhao 2016; Mysicka 2017). At the same time, the message of Xi's Work Report echoes the CCP Central Committee's Resolution on Party History of November 2021 in maintaining that the CCP is the guarantee of China's future not because it has always acted perfectly but precisely because it is a learning organisation, that even when it has made mistakes in the past, as it will in the future, it can still be relied on to act in the interests of the people and China (CCP Central Committee 2021).

The linkage to Marxism and socialism runs (unremarkably) throughout Xi's Work Report and the CCP Constitution. On the other hand, while struggle there may, it is no longer class struggle. Since 1982 the CCP has replaced the role of the proletariat, and indeed the use of the term in both English and Chinese (*wuchanjieji*) by working class or classes (*gongrenjieji*). There are only a few mentions in the Work Report to the 20th Congress of workers, and even fewer of farmers. Their place has now been taken by the people as a whole:

'People-centeredness is an essential attribute of Marxism. Our Party's theories are from the people, for the people, and beneficial to the people. The people's creative practices are the inexhaustible

source of our theoretical innovations. Theories that are detached from the people will be feeble and ineffective, and theories that cannot deliver for the people will be stale and lifeless. We must stand firmly with the people, respond to their wishes, respect their creativity, and pool their wisdom to develop theories that they like, accept, and adopt and that become powerful tools guiding them in understanding and changing the world.'

An important part of the theoretical innovation being referred to here is the development of Marxism in a Chinese context. Here the development of legitimacy is not just with respect to the problems of contemporary development, where Chinese Communists are urged to 'adopt a problem-oriented approach'. In addition, a linkage is made explicitly to what is described as 'China's fine traditional culture'. This is identified as a series of characteristics:

'the pursuit of the common good for all; regarding the people as the foundation of the state; governing by virtue; discarding the outdated in favour of the new; selecting officials on the basis of merit; promoting harmony between humanity and nature; ceaselessly pursuing self-improvement; embracing the world with virtue; acting in good faith and being friendly to others; and fostering neighbourliness.'

Whereas in the past the CCP as a revolutionary organisation sought to completely overthrow Chinese tradition (Guo 2004) the Work Report now suggests that these aspects of the Chinese people's worldview are 'highly consistent with the propositions of scientific socialism.'

The final linkage highlighted in Xi Jinping's Work Report is to democracy: whole-process people's democracy' in which the equation is further stressed between party and people. In the words of the Work Report

'People's democracy is the lifeblood of socialism, and it is integral to our efforts to build a modern socialist country in all respects. Whole-process people's democracy is the defining feature of socialist democracy; it is democracy in its broadest, most genuine, and most effective form.'

The Work Report indicates that this will occur not just through the systems of people's congresses and local elections, but also through the organisation of processes of consultative democracy that will bring various social organisations together under the leadership of the CCP, and through 'improving mechanisms for community-level self-governance under the leadership of primary-level Party organizations.' These forms of democracy may not conform with ideas of liberal democracy or monitory democracy, yet many have written even from outside the Chinese context and in analysing other countries about how these too may be considered democratic in a wider sense (Talmon 1952; Keane 2009; Keane 2017).

Future History

The wider discourse about the results of the Party Congress, both inside and outside China, have almost necessarily concentrated on the appointment of the new leadership for the CCP and by extension to the PRC. One reason for this concentration of attention may well be that with possibly only one significant exception there is little new in the CCP's deliberations on this occasion. The general direction of commitments to social, economic and political development has been in place for well over a decade, though with some minor adjustments in the interim, as was formalized by the *Resolution on the Major Achievements*

and Historical Experiences of the Party over the Past Century at the 6th Plenum of the 19th Central Committee of the CCP in November 2021. In particular, both Resolution and Congress provided an account of the CCP as a learning as well as the guiding organisation that provides the guarantee of China's future history.

The significant exception, which is also not completely new at the Congress, results from the change in emphasis in economic development towards quality of life and not just gross output figures adopted with discussion of the new 14th Five-year Plan in 2020. The policy goal of Common Prosperity has also been on the policy agenda for some two years, and there remains little explicit detail in terms of policy implementation. Nonetheless, Common Prosperity has taken a more central role in the CCP's immediate program with a potential not just for increasing equality of opportunity within China, but also developing new structures of nation and state-building focussed at sub-provincial levels, notably the 299 city-prefectures.

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