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Future History:

Interpreting the Resolution on Party History approved by the 6th Plenum of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 11 November 2021

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On 11 November 2021 the 6th Plenum of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China [CCP] approved a 'Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experiences of the Party over the Past Century.' This was the third time that the CCP has adopted a Resolution on Party History. The first occasion was in 1945 when Mao Zedong's ideological and political position of leadership was formally accepted; and the second was 1981 when the experience of Mao's later years (1958-1976) was negatively evaluated and a new direction in development strategy ensured.

Before the 6th Plenum and the publication of the new Resolution on Party History the expectations outside the People's Republic of China [PRC] and even inside to some extent were that the both would greet the further political elevation of Xi Jinping, the current General-Secretary of the CCP and President of the PRC. Some sources even talked in terms of President Xi Jinping's appointment for life. In the event, these expectations are not met in the Resolution, and indeed there is very little new to be found in its contents. Its statements and sentiments have been expressed before, both in the recent and the more distant past.

Familiar ground was trod by the new Resolution in its echoing and repetition of formulae from the two earlier Resolutions on Party History. A major part of the Resolution is concerned with the definition of Chinese Marxism: the adaptation of Marxism Leninism to Chinese conditions. The 1945 Resolution begins

'Ever since its birth in 1921 the Communist Party of China has made the integration of the universal truth of Marxism Leninism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution the guiding principle in all its work, and Comrade Mao Zedong's theory and practice of the Chinese revolution represents this integration.'

The 2021 Resolution on Party History explains

'Marxism is the fundamental guiding ideology upon which our Party and our country are founded and thrive. Marxist theory is not a dogma, but a guide to action; it must develop with the evolution of practice, and only by adapting to the Chinese context can it take root in our country and gain a firm place in Chinese people's hearts.'

The 2021 Resolution reinforces the judgement of the 1981 Resolution on Mao and the Cultural Revolution, and did not exonerate the former Chairman of the CCP as some had predicted would occur:

‘Regrettably, the correct line adopted at the Party’s Eighth National Congress was not fully upheld. Mistakes were made such as the Great Leap Forward and the people’s commune movement, and the scope of the struggle against Rightists was also made far too broad. Confronted with a grave and complex external environment at the time, the Party was extremely concerned about consolidating China’s socialist state power, and made a wide range of efforts in this regard. However, Comrade Mao Zedong’s theoretical and practical errors concerning class struggle in a socialist society became increasingly serious, and the Central Committee failed to rectify these mistakes in good time. Under a completely erroneous appraisal of the prevailing class relations and the political situation in the Party and the country, Comrade Mao Zedong launched and led the Cultural Revolution. The counterrevolutionary cliques of Lin Biao and Jiang Qing took advantage of Comrade Mao Zedong’s mistakes, and committed many crimes that brought disaster to the country and the people, resulting in ten years of domestic turmoil which caused the Party, the country, and the people to suffer the most serious losses and setbacks since the founding of the People’s Republic. This was an extremely bitter lesson. Acting on the will of the Party and the people, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee resolutely smashed the Gang of Four in October 1976, putting an end to the catastrophic Cultural Revolution.’

In both 1945 and 1981 the Resolution on Party History signalled a change in direction for the CCP. Such a document is after all approved by the Central Committee of the CCP and deals primarily with CCP internal affairs. Mao’s leadership in the case of the former; the re-adoption of what were seen as Party norms of political operation in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, in the latter. Such a change of direction is not signalled by the 2021 Resolution. On the contrary in an environment where it is normal for the 6th plenum of the Central Committee in-between Party Congress to deal with ideological issues, the 2021 Resolution on Party History is on the surface at least a fairly post-1978 fairly typical ideological statement, if perhaps a bit more long-winded, rather than a major review of Party history.

The challenge the CCP and for that matter the PRC faces is not recently adapted policies and practices, as was the case in 1945 and 1981. Rather the challenge is that of future change, especially as the PRC attempts to move up the economic value chain, to develop new economic capacity and new technologies, and to deliver on the revolution of rising social expectations. There used to be a joke in the former Soviet Union: ‘The future is certain; it is only the past that is unpredictable.’ A significant novelty in this Resolution on Party History is that it actually highlights future unpredictability.

‘There are many risks and challenges on the journey ahead, some of which we can foresee and others we cannot.’

The main function of the Resolution on Party History is the attempt to ensure the CCP's future legitimacy no matter what. The Resolution's argument is clear. The CCP's past experience demonstrates three building blocks towards its forward legitimacy. The long-held equation of the Party, the People, and China. While leadership may have made mistakes in the past, it has still kept its commitments to the People and to China. And in that context the most important of those commitments has been the raising of standards of living and increasing economic prosperity.

'Having the courage to reform itself is a hallmark that distinguishes the Communist Party of China from other political parties. The spirit of self-reform underpins the Party's ability to maintain its youthful vigor.'

In that context Xi Jinping's role in transformation is secondary to that of the Party as part of the 'strong leadership role' that the Resolution tautologically demands.

'The advanced nature of a Marxist party is not a given, but rather cultivated through constant self-reform. The Party has emerged from one hundred years of vicissitudes with even greater vitality. The secret to this lies in the Party's commitment to upholding truth and righting errors. The Party is great not because it never makes mistakes, but because it always owns up to its errors, actively engages in criticism and self-criticism, and has the courage to confront problems and reform itself. As long as we consistently remove all elements that would harm the Party's advanced nature and integrity, and eliminate any viruses that would erode its health, we will be able to ensure that the Party preserves its essence, color, and character and see that it always serves as the strong leadership core in the course of upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.'

This is of course tautological because as in the 2021 Resolution on Party History and indeed elsewhere earlier, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' is defined in terms of the rule of the CCP

'The leadership of the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.'

The recipe for the future contained in the Resolution on Party History contains many disparate elements, suggesting it has emerged from considerable discussion and coalition-building. In addition to matters of largely CCP concern there are also commitments to PLA development, global trade, improved health and social welfare, and to the market playing 'the decisive role in resource allocation' while 'government plays its role better.' The political concerns include Party leadership; the appointment of 'loyal, upright officials'; better governance; and ideological conformity

'We must educate our people with Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, enhance cohesion by instilling in them the Party's ideals and convictions, nourish them with the core socialist values, and inspire them with the historic mission of national rejuvenation.'

The socio-economic focus of the new Resolution on Party History is very clear

‘the principal contradiction facing Chinese society is that between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life.’

In international relations, the Resolution commits the CCP to a global outlook, steeped in an ‘independent’ and Chinese nationalist perspective that equally has domestic repercussions. The description of the Chinese path to the future is particularly apposite, not least because of its opening nod in the direction of earlier Chinese writing (and culture)

‘The direction determines the path, and the path determines the future. Throughout its endeavors over the past century, the Party has always stayed grounded in China’s conditions and felt out a right path consistent with China’s realities—the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics. It is a sure path toward a better life for the people and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The Chinese land, the Chinese civilization, and the Chinese path provide our Party and people an infinitely vast stage, a heritage of incomparable depth, and unmatched resolve for forging ahead.

We must neither retrace our steps to the rigidity and isolation of the past, nor take a wrong turn by changing our nature and abandoning our system. As long as we follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics with unswerving commitment, we will be able to develop China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful.’

The prospects for this recipe are necessarily debatable. Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung in a just published article (November 2021) argue that short and mid-term this strategy is most likely to prove successful. Though written before the 6th Plenum and the publication of the Resolution on Party History it details the contours of ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era’. At the same time, they have doubts that the recipe for managing unpredictable change is sustainable in the longer term. They argue that several aspects of Xi Jinping’s strategy may prove too brittle in the longer term. In particular, they highlight the end of collective leadership; the end to a predictable and orderly succession; a more statist approach to managing the economy; and less pragmatism in foreign affairs.

All four of the issues highlighted by Tsang and Cheung might present serious challenges to the implied strategy for China’s future entailed in the Resolution on Party History were they to prove to be the case. They are though essentially contested experiences: there is no guarantee any or indeed all will come to pass. The CCP has to date, despite any upgrading of Xi Jinping’s role as a CCP figurehead, demonstrated its understanding of the need for both collective leadership and the maintenance of the Party’s internal rules of operation. Indeed the 2021 Resolution on Party History highlights ‘The Code of Conduct for Intraparty Political Life under New Circumstances’ approved at the 6th Plenum of the 18th Central Committee, in October 2016. In the drive to the policy goal of Common Prosperity, signalled both before the 6th plenum in November 2021 and in the Resolution on Party History the balance between government economic management and the role of the market, as well as the shape and function of local social governance remains far from clear. Certainly the jury remains out on the extent to which the CCP has abandoned pragmatism in foreign affairs.

At the same time, this is certainly not to say that there are no dangers that could derail the CCP's recipe for the PRC's future, even without considering the prospects for regime change. Ensuring economic growth, technological development, and innovation to lift a lower-middle income country into the range of being a more economically advanced high-income has proved difficult enough anywhere at any time let alone in a country with the size, scale, and variety of the PRC. While leadership instability cannot be considered impossible, especially now that the Resolution on Party History has to a certain extent legitimised the unpredictable, it is clear that the CCP appreciates the dangers of a divided leadership. Ensuring that there is not more leadership instability than necessary may not be a readily manageable task. Even so, these two major challenges are though a long way from presaging regime change. In the early 1990s Jack Goldstone and his colleagues identified the sufficient factors that when they occurred together have necessarily resulted in regime change: a divided elite; a state crisis (usually financial); and dramatically increased mass unrest.

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