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Xi Jinping Forever?

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In the Chinese Communist Party's 20th National Congress, which begins in Beijing on Sunday, President Xi Jinping is expected to be confirmed as president-for-life. If that actually happens, China's ascent to genuine superpower status will be at least delayed. At worst (from the Chinese perspective), it may not happen at all.

The CCP has now been in power for about as long as the old Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) had been when it finally lost power in 1991. Most of the CCP's members are keenly aware of that fact, and just staying in power is the Party's primary goal.

Superpower status, the public's welfare, any and all other goals are secondary to the Party's survival. This priority can be defended if you are truly convinced that Marxism-Leninism holds the only key to a happy and prosperous future, but it serves quite well as a rationalisation for holding on to power forever even if you don't really believe it.

Most of the CCP's senior cadres realize that the Party is still in power now only because it broke decisively with Mao Zedong's methods in the mid-1980s, about a decade after his death. They continue to give Mao lip service because he was the iconic leader of the Revolution, but they don't really believe in his methods.

Mao's strategy of permanent revolution was why China's economy stagnated for almost four decades while its East Asian neighbours, Japan and South Korea, enjoyed 40 years of high-speed growth and emerged as rich countries. Only when Deng Xiaoping sidelined ideology and put growth first did China get its own 40 years of high-speed growth.

That period of rapid industrialisation has now come to its natural end. The real Chinese growth rate now and for the foreseeable future will be in the annual 1%-3% range that is typical in developed economies.

Or rather, it will continue on that trajectory so long as China continues in the path Deng chose: a capitalist economy dominated by people with moderate socialist views about the distribution of wealth. However, that's a tricky path to walk.

To stop the Communist true believers from dragging China back into revolutionary fanaticism, Deng and his successors promoted the principle of ?collective leadership'. No single Party member could accumulate too much power, the most senior leaders would be limited to two five-year terms, and Mao-style ?personality cults' were banned.

That system has grown and matured over 30 years, during which the main challenge has come from the right, from people in both industry and the Party with a keen interest in getting and staying rich: ?corruption', as it is generally called in China. But Xi Jinping poses a different kind of challenge to the status quo.

His rise through the ranks of the Party was accomplished mainly by exploiting family ties: his father had impeccable revolutionary credentials and was widely respected in the Party. But once Xi achieved high office 10 years ago, he set about dismantling all the rules and customs that prevented a return to one-man rule.

Whether he genuinely believes in Marxism-Leninism is unknowable, but also irrelevant. He is dedicated to attaining absolute power, and he will invoke the old faith if it provides a useful justification for that pursuit. By now, he is pretty close to his goal.

Unfortunately for China, Xi is nearing absolute power at a time when a reversion to the old ways is the last thing it needs. The country faces a demographic crisis and an economic crisis at the same time, and re-centralising power in the hands of a single man is definitely not the best way to solve those problems.

The recurring Covid lockdowns that are paralysing Chinese cities, crippling the economy and stoking popular anger, are just one

example of how his private obsessions are starting to threaten the Party's grip on power. Xi's answer, as always, is just more severe repression.

This month's National Congress is the last hurdle on his route to absolute power, because the 2,226 delegates will be asked to cast aside the two-term limit. Technically, they would only be granting Xi a third term as president, but everybody thinks that it will mean he stays in office for life. Or maybe just until he is overthrown, because he is almost uniquely unsuited to deal with problems like a shrinking work-force (due to the collapsing birth-rate), rising unemployment and a huge debt crisis.

There are plenty of people in the Party who understand that Xi's reversion to the bad old ways might ultimately bring about the end of Communist rule in China, but they seem too few and too cowed to challenge him directly. China may be in for a wild ride ? and the rest of us with it.