

Only Socialism Can Save China; Only Xi Jinping Can Save Socialism

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The abolition of constitutional term limits on the post of PRC president has attracted more attention than usually attends Chinese leadership politics, and sparked a flood of speculation about the purposes of Xi Jinping in engineering it. Looked at closely in context, the step may not be as far-reaching in its implications as is often presumed.

The abolition of the two five-year term limits on the posts of PRC president and vice president was accomplished in the revision of the 1982 PRC constitution at the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) held 5–20 March of this year. The PRC president is head of state, and so by protocol the president represents China at the highest level abroad and receives foreign heads of state at home.

Politically, however, the post is largely ceremonial. The post of PRC vice president is even less potent. The president signs legislation adopted by the NPC but cannot veto it. The president proclaims martial law but only after the NPC has declared it. The president receives the credentials of foreign envoys and awards various state honors, but otherwise has no real powers. The real source of the president's political power is his concurrent service as party general secretary and chairman of the Central Military Commission, a coupling of appointments that began with Jiang Zemin in 1993.

It is noteworthy that the abolition of term limits in the amended constitution did not extend to other top posts in the PRC hierarchy. The two five-year term limits on the posts of premier and vice premier and the posts of NPC chairman and vice chairman remains in the constitution. Moreover, in establishing the new State Supervision Commission, the revision incorporated term limits on the posts of director and deputy director. The specificity of the abolition of term limits to the post of president, therefore, underscores that the step was undertaken to extend the possible tenure of its current incumbent, party General Secretary Xi Jinping, beyond 2023, when his tenure as president would have termed out. The step complements in implication the failure of the 18–24 October 2017 19th Party Congress to name a successor-in-training to succeed Xi as party chief at the 20th Party Congress in 2022.

The step emerged as part of a larger package of changes billed as suiting a “new era in socialism with Chinese characteristics”:

- The party's 19th National Congress in October 2017 enunciated a new ideological framework to guide the party agenda for the next three decades—the “new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

- Revisions of the PRC constitution authorized at the 19th Central Committee's Second Plenum on 18–19 January and adopted at the March NPC session—the first amendments since 2004—incorporated new elements and adjustments to suit the ideological framework of the “new era” and centralization of party power.
- The 19th Central Committee's Third Plenum on 26–28 February proposed and the March NPC session adopted a sweeping organizational restructuring of the entire political order to facilitate implementation of the policies associated with the “new era.”

Leadership expositions and party documents indicate that the Xi leadership began preparing these changes last summer before the 19th Congress. They are to be taken together as a package of complementary ideological and institutional changes to guide the party's agenda as it works to achieve the goals of the two centenary anniversaries—building a “moderately prosperous society” (小康社会) by the party's 100th founding anniversary in 2021 and “a modern socialist country” by the PRC's 100th anniversary in 2049.

The Significance of the “New Era”

The concept of a “new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics” that Xi Jinping announced in his report to the 19th Party Congress traces its roots to the ideological foundations of the reform era that Deng Xiaoping laid 40 years ago. The Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978 proclaimed that the focus of party work would shift from “waging class struggle”—the party's foremost priority under Mao Zedong and the ideological premise for the tumultuous “revolutionary” politics he promoted—to China's “socialist modernization.” Henceforth, the party's “general task” would be to achieve the “four modernizations”: building a “modern agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense” by the year 2000.¹

In June 1981, the 11th Central Committee's Sixth Plenum adopted a long resolution on issues in party history which, using the logic of Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism, stipulated: “the principal contradiction in Chinese society is that between the people's growing material and cultural needs and the backward level of our social production.” It posited further that China currently is only in the “initial stage of socialism,” a level of development which would endure for a century or more.

In his speech opening the 12th Party Congress in September 1982, Deng Xiaoping declared that the party would practice “socialism with Chinese characteristics” in pursuing China's modernization. The preamble of the new party constitution adopted at the congress incorporated the 1981 party history resolution's stipulations on the “principal contradiction” that the party must address and the judgment that China is only in the “initial stage of socialism.” Hu Yaobang's report to the congress reaffirmed the “four modernizations” as the party's “general task” and called for quadrupling China's gross domestic product by 2000, setting out a two-stage framework for achieving it. The first stage encompassed the 1980s and would focus on “laying a solid foundation,

accumulating strength, and creating necessary conditions”; the second would span the 1990s and “usher in a new period of vigorous economic development.”

The judgments that the “principal contradiction” the party faced was “between the growing material and cultural needs of the people and the backwardness of production” and that China is in only the “initial stage of socialism”—all under Deng’s rubric of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”—established the enduring ideological framework of reform. After the 12th Party Congress, each element of the framework was strongly reaffirmed at each successive party congress through the 18th in 2012.

The Two Centenary Goals

Along the way, in his report to the 15th Party Congress in 1997, with the goal declared by Hu Yaobang in 1982 of quadrupling China’s GDP already achieved, then party General Secretary Jiang Zemin rephrased the party’s “general task” broadly to be “economic development.” In addition, paralleling the two-stage program that Hu Yaobang set forth in 1982 for achieving the “four modernizations” by 2000, Jiang’s 15th Party Congress report laid out a new two-stage program for the first two decades of the 21st century—ending with the CCP’s centenary in 2021—and added a third stage ending with the PRC’s centenary in 2049:

Looking into the next century, we have set our goals as follows: In the first decade the gross national product will double that of the year 2000, the people will enjoy an even more comfortable life and a more or less ideal socialist market economy will have come into being. With the efforts to be made in another decade when the Party celebrates its centenary, the national economy will be more developed and the various systems will be further improved. By the middle of the next century when the People’s Republic celebrates its centenary, the modernization program will have been accomplished by and large and China will have become a prosperous, strong, democratic and culturally advanced socialist country.

In his report to the 16th Party Congress in 2002, Jiang Zemin focused on the first-stage goal pegged to the party’s 2021 centenary—refined to building “a moderately prosperous society” (小康社会)—and laid out a broad set of tasks to pursuit it. Hu Jintao strongly reaffirmed the first centenary goal in his report at the 17th Congress in 2007, and he emphasized it again at the 18th in 2012, laying out a concrete agenda for its pursuit. That agenda called on the party to pursue the construction of a “moderately prosperous society” by “comprehensively deepening reform,” announced as the congress’s main theme in the title of Hu’s report and in the heading of its chapter on the main tasks the party should undertake ahead.

Under Xi Jinping’s leadership, the 2021 party centenary tasks were spelled out in more detail in the November 2013 Third Plenum. The session cited impetus from the party congress (it was said to convene “in order to implement the 18th CPC National Congress strategic plan for the comprehensive deepening of reforms”), and it adopted a 60-point decision that listed some 300 reforms in seven policy sectors—economy, ecology, law,

culture and media, social management, military and party—all to be completed by 2021. Early in 2014, a Central Committee Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform was established to coordinate implementation of the reforms.

The 19th Party Congress

In laying out the party's agenda at the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping reaffirmed essential ideological elements of the Dengist framework of reform. "Socialism with Chinese characteristics," he declared, has "crossed a threshold" into a "new era." And China "is still and will long remain in "the initial stage of socialism."

What has changed, Xi explained, is that the "principal contradiction" in Chinese society is no longer "between the people's growing material and cultural needs and the backward level of our social production." Thanks to four decades of reform under "socialism with Chinese characteristics," China "has seen the basic needs of over a billion people met and made it possible for people to live decent lives," he stated. The "principal contradiction" has therefore "evolved" and is now "between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life." It is this new "principal contradiction" that characterizes the "new era" and its agenda as defined by the two centenary goals.

"We must recognize," Xi went on, "that the evolution of the principal contradiction facing Chinese society represents a historic shift that affects the whole landscape and that creates many new demands for the work of the party and the country." As China faces "the decisive stage" in achieving the first centenary goal and "moves on to all-out efforts" to achieving the second, therefore, "it will take more than beating drums and clanging gongs to get there." The party must "undertake great struggle with many new contemporary features," above all upholding party centralized leadership.

The "New Era" and Constitutional Revision

According to the presentation to the NPC on 5 March by Wang Chen, the Politburo member and soon to be appointed secretary general of the NPC Standing Committee, the Xi leadership kicked off the process of amending the 1982 PRC Constitution before the 19th Party Congress last fall. Wang revealed that a previously unpublicized meeting of the Politburo 29 September 2017 appointed a drafting group led by then NPC Chairman Zhang Dejiang and by party General Office Director Li Zhanshu and Party Research Office Wang Huning's deputies.

After the party congress, a party Central Committee circular on 13 November solicited views from various levels of the party, and a meeting with non-party personages elicited more, for a total of 2,639 suggestions for amendments. Successive Politburo Standing Committee and Politburo meetings reviewed an initial draft of revisions, which was then circulated widely, producing 230 new proposals. Xi Jinping presided over a forum for non-party leaders on 15 December, and Zhang Dejiang held four symposia on the draft for party and state leaders. A revised slate of revisions was then reviewed and approved by the Politburo and its Standing Committee, which was then submitted to the 19th

Central Committee's Second Plenum on 18–19 January. Approved by the party plenum, the amendments were forwarded on 26 January to an NPC Standing Committee session for submission to the first session of the 12th NPC, which opened on 5 March.

In his presentation to the NPC, Wang stated that revisions of the constitution were made necessary by the 19th Party Congress's "important strategic arrangements for adhering to and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics," establishing a "new historical starting point." By amending the constitution in accord with the requirements of the "new era," "the continuity, stability, and authority" of the constitution could be maintained. (Xinhua, 6 March 2018)

Some of the amendments simply updated the PRC constitution in keeping with the evolution of party doctrines since 2004, when the last revisions were adopted. For example, the preamble was revised to incorporate the "scientific development concept" associated with former party General Secretary Hu Jintao.

But most of the revisions reflected the priorities that have emerged under the leadership of Xi Jinping:

- "Xi Jinping Thought for the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics" was written into the constitution's preamble, replicating its addition to the party constitution at the 19th Party Congress.
- Abetting the stress of the Xi leadership on centralized party authority in the political order, the stipulation in the constitution's Article One that "the socialist system is the fundamental system of the PRC" was amended to state that "the leadership of the CCP is the most essential characteristic of socialism with Chinese characteristics."
- Themes that have featured prominently in political discourse of the Xi leadership—the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," the "socialist rule of law" replacing the "socialist legal system," "socialist core values" alongside "civic values," and "building a community of common human destiny"—were added.
- Provision for all officials to take an oath of loyalty to the PRC constitution was added. The NPC Standing Committee had already mandated this practice in July 2015, and Xi Jinping himself set an example by taking the oath following his reappointment as PRC president on the last day of the NPC session.
- Provision was made for the new State Supervisory Commission established by the NPC session to institutionalize the effort to root out corruption among party and state officials launched at the beginning of Xi Jinping's tenure.

The “New Era” and Institutional Reform

The institutional reforms mandated by the Third Plenum and the NPC session are the most extensive in scope, if not in depth, of the entire post-Mao era. The ministries and agencies of the State Council have been reorganized by every new NPC since 1982. Party institutions saw major changes in the first years of the reform, and the People’s Liberation Army underwent fundamental reorganization in the mid-1980s under Deng Xiaoping and again in December 2015 under Xi Jinping. But the eight-part Central Committee “Plan of Deepening Reform of Party Institutions” adopted by the 19th Central Committee’s Third Plenum in February and approved by the March NPC session laid out 60 reforms across the political system, including changes in the party, in the NPC and the State Council, in state regulatory bodies, in the united front’s Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, in police and military security forces, in mass organizations, and in local organizations.

The “Plan,” Xi Jinping’s explanation of it to the party plenum, and subsequent authoritative commentary all stressed that the institutional reforms are required to facilitate achievement of the priorities of the “new era.” The reforms are needed, the “Plan” states, to “resolutely preserve the authority and centralized and unified leadership of the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core, to adapt to the new demands of developing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, and to adhere to the general work spirit of seeking progress while maintaining stability and maintaining the correct reform orientation,” among other priorities.

In presenting the “Plan” to the Third Plenum, Xi recounted the process of drafting it. At a session of the Central Committee’s Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform (CDRLSG) in 2015, Xi ordered research into revising party and state institutions. During the latter half of 2017, the CDRLSG and the party’s Central Institution Organization Committee (中央机构编制委员会) led by Premier Li Keqiang formed 10 investigation teams which visited all 31 PRC provinces and province-level cities and 71 central party and state institutions, gathering 139 opinions and suggestions for reform. In addition, 1,197 officials in 657 counties and wards responded to surveys.

The plan’s drafting group held its first meeting on 11 December 2017, and meetings of the Politburo and its Standing Committee subsequently reviewed the group’s efforts. The party General Office circulated the plan for discussion within the party and among “veteran leaders” on 1 February 2018, and Xi presided over a meeting of representatives from non-party sectors, eliciting more suggestions. The drafting group then distilled the hundreds of suggestions and proposals onto a final plan, which the Politburo and its Standing Committee ultimately approved for submission to the Third Plenum of the Central Committee.²

According to Xi’s explanation to the Third Plenum, the foremost aims of the reform plan are to “respond to the requirements of the New Era” and “implement the strategic tasks for party and state institutional reform set forth by the 19th Party Congress” and “to perfect the institutions that uphold the party’s comprehensive leadership.” Many of the

60 reforms in the plan appear focused on centralizing party control throughout the political order:

- Four Central Committee leading small groups—the CDRLSG, the Finance and Economy Leading Small Group, the Cybersecurity Leading Small Group, and the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group—were elevated to Central Committee commissions, effectively formalizing what previously had been informal policy coordination task forces.
- Three new Central Committee commissions—a “Comprehensively Governing according to Law Commission,” an Audit Commission, and the State Supervisory Commission—were established.³
- A new Central Committee leading small group for education was established.
- Some Central Committee organs were combined or modified. The Party History Research Office and Party Literature Research Office will be combined. The Central Party School will become the State Academy of Governance.
- Central Committee departments have been given more direct roles in “uniformly managing” relevant sectors: the Organization Department managing civil servants; the Propaganda Department managing news, publishing and film-making; and the United Front Work Department managing minority affairs, religion, and overseas Chinese policy.

The “New Era and Xi Jinping

The linchpin of the package of ideological, legal, and institutional changes adopted at the 19th Party Congress and the 12th NPC is the leadership of Xi Jinping. His “Thought” now guides the party as it advances into the “New Era” and marches toward achievement of the two centenary goals. The elevation of four of the leading small groups that Xi chairs to the level of party commission enhances his authority, if not necessarily his power. And the abolition of the term limit on his post as PRC president opens the way to his staying in power beyond the 20th Party Congress in 2021 and the 13th NPC in 2022.

But there are limits on the enhancements to his authority. “Xi Jinping Thought for the New Era of socialism with Chinese Characteristics” is not credited, in authoritative party documents and commentary at least, solely to his pioneering genius. The revised party constitution adopted at the 19th Party Congress states that “Xi Jinping Thought” is “the crystallization of the practical experience and wisdom of the party and people.” Wang Chen repeated the same formulation in his explanation of writing “Xi Jinping Thought” into the PRC constitution. The preface to the second volume of Xi Jinping’s speeches and talks, *On Governance*, published on the eve of the 19th Party Congress, states that “China’s communists headed by Xi Jinping” “together have created Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era.” Xi is the “principal proponent” of these doctrines, but not exclusively their author.

Further, authoritative explanations for the abolition of the term limit on the post of PRC president imply that Xi's potential appointments beyond 2021–2022 do not convey an expectation of lifetime tenure. A long article in *People's Daily* on 1 March under the byline “Xuan Li”—a pseudonym for the party Propaganda Department's Theory Bureau—adhered to the standard line that the abolition of the term limit is “conducive to maintaining the stability” of China's unitary leadership system, by which the party general secretary serves concurrently as top military leader and head of state. But “Xuan Li” went on to note that the change does “not signify changing the retirement system for leading cadres of the party and the state, nor does it signify life tenure for offices of leading cadres.”⁴

Conclusion

Xi Jinping's enhanced authority with the party's top leadership when he came to power in 2012 appears to have been a product of the frustrations and stagnation of policy-making in the second term of Hu Jintao's leadership. The Hu leadership seemed unable to address several critical issues facing the country, while several long-debated reform initiatives appeared stalled. In appointing Xi as general secretary, the party elite gave him enhanced authority so as to break policy deadlocks in the Politburo as well as new tools—such as the aggressive counter-corruption campaign and the concerted effort to centralize party power—to attack “vested interests” that had blunted progress in “double centenary” reforms deemed essential to the party's longer-term survival.

The package of reforms pushed through the 19th Party Congress and the 12th NPC seems to have doubled down on this approach. Xi's potential appointment beyond 2021–2022 is intimately intertwined with and conditioned on pursuit of the larger policy goals set down when he came to power. The broader political context of the abolition of the presidential term limit therefore amounts to an acknowledgment that the old CCP adage “only socialism can save China” requires the new corollary that “only Xi Jinping can save socialism.”

Notes

¹ In February 1981, the sequence of the “four modernizations” was revised without explanation to read a “modern industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense” by the year 2000.

² Xi Jinping, “关于深化党和国家机构改革决定和方案的说明” (Explanation of the decision and plan to deepen reform of party and state organs), in “‘中共中央关于深化党和国家机构改革的决定’ ‘深化党和国家机构改革方案’ 辅导读本” (Guidance reader on “The CCP Central Committee “Decision of Deepening Reform of the Party and State Organs” and “Plan for Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions”), 人民出版社 (People's Publishing House), 2018.

³ Interestingly, the creation of the State Supervision Commission by amalgamating counter-corruption processes managed by the party's watchdog Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the State Council's Ministry of Supervision parallels the merger of the CPSU Control Commission and the USSR's Control Commission as part of

a major institutional reorganization under Nikita Khrushchev at a party Central Committee plenum in November 1962.

⁴ “Xuan Li” (宣理), “保证党和国家长治久安的重大制度安排” (Major institutional arrangements for guaranteeing the long-term stability of the Party and the State), *People's Daily*, 1 March 2018, p 3.