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The Xi Factor

Steve Tsang on the outcome of the CCP congress and Trump's expected visit to China

What is the most important outcome you take away from the week-long 19th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)?

Xi's breath-taking articulation of confidence as he projected China's development in the next 15 to 30 years. This is to be achieved by the leader of the party (Xi himself) exercising tight control over it, which is tasked to lead the Chinese people to this promised land. In three decades from now, China will be modern, powerful, advanced, beautiful, and it will be second to none. It will request and require the rest of the world to pay it due respect. It will follow the Chinese socialist road of development, which means that it will not be democratic and capitalist in the Western sense. This implies that Xi will be indispensable as the leader of China for an undefined period of time to come, thus casting the issue of succession for the 20th congress, scheduled for 2022, in doubt. The writing of his name and his 'thoughts' into the party charter is to ensure this will happen.

Xi Jinping's political thoughts were written into the constitution. What does this mean? Is it more than the recognition of Xi's achievements? Does this indicate the party's policy priorities for the years ahead?

It means two key things. The formulation used to include his thoughts is important. Instead of having 'Xi Jinping's thoughts' written into the party charter, which would put him on a par with Mao Zedong, Xi only managed to get 'Xi Jinping's thoughts on socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era' incorporated. This is still more than Deng Xiaoping, who merely got his name associated with a 'theory' as 'Deng Xiaoping's theory', and achieved this only upon his death. Therefore, Xi is asserting that he enjoys a standing second only to Mao but ahead of Deng in the ranking of the party's greatest figures. This also implies that while Xi has now amassed unprecedented power in the post-Mao era, he is not yet 'all powerful', as he still had to compromise with others in the leadership

in not being able to get the simple format of 'Xi Jinping's thoughts' adopted in the party charter. But by getting this done while he is in power, he is also ensuring that from now on, anyone who opposes Xi will be deemed to oppose the party charter or the party, and thus be a 'counter-revolutionary'. This will make him appear nearly unassailable. Its policy implications are that Xi now sets the priorities and others will have to work to implement them. Xi's pet projects, in terms of tightening party discipline and control as well as the Belt and Road Initiative, will continue to dominate China's policy agenda.

Xi said that his government must 'greatly relax market entry restrictions.' Is that a pre-emptive step to prepare for Donald Trump's expected visit to China at the beginning of November?

Xi arranged for Trump to visit shortly after the party congress as he was confident that he would get nearly all of what he wanted at the congress, so the risk of embarrassment would be low. This has now happened. But Xi is probably uncertain of what Trump will do. It would therefore be useful for Xi to present himself as a champion of economic globalisation, which he articulated at Davos. Greatly relaxing market entry restrictions of course contradicts the tightening of party control in all spheres. But Xi sees no inherent contradiction between the two, as in the new Xi era, relaxing market restrictions or opening the economy up further will happen under the leadership of the party. The party remains firmly Leninist, and Xi has made a commitment to reinvigorate its Leninist nature and effectiveness.

Interview by Hannes Alpen.



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