XI JINPING: COMRADE AND CORE LEADER

Giovanni Andornino

Chinese President Xi Jinping emerged from the sixth plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the leadership designation of "core" (*hexin*, 核心). The <u>348</u> most senior members of the Party officially conferred the title to their Secretary General <u>months after</u> the term had sporadically <u>appeared</u> in local-level policy documents. The event left political observers to wonder whether this could mark a new phase in Xi Jinping's further accretion of executive, legislative, and military power. The political significance of this latest development in the Chinese semantics of power, however, appears to be overstated by many Zhongnanhai-ologists, latter-day Kremlinologists attempting to read the tea leaves of the internal politics of the highly secretive top echelon of the CCP.

The use of the "core leader" title does not come as a novelty for the Chinese Communist Party. This specific leadership designation was first introduced by Deng Xiaoping to refer to Chairman Mao Zedong, himself, and his ultimate successor Jiang Zemin (after the two aborted successions in the tumultuous 1980s), specifically to put Jiang on a par with his predecessors despite his lack of revolutionary and military credentials. A tangible watershed moment in the dynamics of Chinese domestic politics came when Hu Jintao, Secretary General and President after Jiang, was denied what Alice Miller calls the "trappings of paramount leadership", being thus labelled as a leader amongst equals – primus inter pares. Today, Xi Jinping's elevation to "core leader" seals his authoritativeness as a primus inter inferiores.

While it is difficult to determine at this stage whether the "core leader" title serves the purpose of allowing president Xi to amass even greater power in his own hands in the coming years, or whether this tifa 提法 (official wording) is employed to mark the achievement of the empowerment goals Xi had set for himself upon taking office in 2012, it is becoming clear that, with the opening of the 19th CCP Congress in a year's time, President Xi may seek to use his preponderant leadership position to gain greater control over the appointment of the Party's ruling élite.

Preponderant leadership rarely goes unopposed, however, as the President no doubt knows well. It is hardly surprising, then, that the recent plenum has also been careful to place renewed emphasis on the notion of "collective leadership". Mindful, *inter alia*, of the tragic implications of Mao's disproportionately discretionary exercise of power (esp. 1957-1976),



the CPC is aware of the need for public discourse to be crafted so as to minimize concerns over Xi's power build-up.

Resistance to Xi's policies, however, is unlikely to be mitigated by any lip service paid to the collective wisdom of the Party. The very scarce traction of the ambitious reforms announced after the third plenum of the CCP Central Committee in 2014 reveals the extent to which President Xi has been confronted with uphill battles in his attempt to implement SOE and military reforms in the absence of strong backing from either the enterprises in question, or the armed forces. Instances of (mostly passiveaggressive) resistance against Xi Jinping's drive to enact structural reforms have shown to be systemic, recurrent, and diffuse over time, requiring the President to invest significant political capital for the prompt implementation of his policy designs.

Ultimately, the buck of reforms in China is going to stop with Xi: things will have to get worse before they get better, as investments domestically must shrink (and economic growth slow down) to accommodate the kind of structural rebalancing China's economy needs to effectively approach a kind of "new normal" where economic opportunities are more widelv contested and all-round human development is prioritized over capital accumulation and aggregate GDP.

Enacting reforms in pursuit of outcomes of such magnitude would be a tremendous

test for any leader, let alone one who sits ontop of a Leninist power system whose legitimacy has for the past 35 years been intimately tied to the delivery of better livelihood (or, at the very least, to a credible expectation thereof) to very broad sectors of his country's society. Failure to enact structural reforms, on the other hand, would lead to sharply rising political costs down the road – costs that would most likely have to be borne by the same President Xi during the course of his next term in office, from 2017 to 2022 (let alone if he were to extend his leadership beyond 2022 – a dramatic break with entrenched succession practices, but not an entirely implausible scenario at the moment).

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In this context, alluding to a return to Mao's days, as routinely done by a number of commentators, hardly helps us understand the political logic at play in Xi's China. A more grounded approach to gauge where Xi is heading may be to look at where his inner circle is coming from. Wang Huning, in particular, one of Xi's closest advisors on political-institutional matters, has been an influential voice on China's political course since his days as a Professor at Shanghai's Fudan University in the 1980s. When debates involving Deng's then heirs-presumptive Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang touched on the possibility for reforms to bring about a more thorough separation of Party and State, and allow room for some degree of pluralism, Wang argued that sustainable reforms could only be achieved by first overcoming an era of power fragmentation through a neo-authoritarian concentration of power at the centre of the Party-State. In other words, Wang argued that for economic and social reforms to be implemented within a framework of stability, the accretion of power in the hands of a competent central leadership would first be required. Political reforms



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Today, Wang's corollary is very unlikely to retain any of the traction it once enjoyed within the upper echelons of the Party, where he has now been serving under three successive leaders since 1995. Nonetheless, the CCP is indeed witnessing today a phase of renewed authoritarianism, which – if read against the background of Wang's old writings could be seen not as

an end per se, but as part of a broader strategy, a necessary "evil" to ensure that incisive reforms in the economic realm can become entrenched in a reluctant system. Bringing about this transition would seal Xi Jinping's legacy as the PRC's most consequential leader since China began its reforms and opening under Deng Xiaoping almost four decades ago.

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