As the growing backlash against globalization picks up pace, populists and nationalists are on the march, particularly in the US and Europe. Leaders in Asia can hardly escape this growing trend, even as they grapple with their own emerging domestic challenges and the evolving transformation in the regional order. We profile some of Asia’s key leaders and the mark they are making.

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**All Xi, All the Time: Can China’s President Live Up to His Own Top Billing?**

By David Shambaugh

Chinese President Xi Jinping is convinced that for his country to achieve the “Chinese Dream” and assume its rightful place on the global stage, the central role of the Chinese Communist Party and the importance of leadership from the top must be strengthened.

That flies in the face of those who believe China’s future lies in greater openness and reform. David Shambaugh examines how Xi’s approach to leadership is moving China both forward and backward.

XI JINPING IS widely viewed as the strongest leader China has had since Deng Xiaoping or Chairman Mao Zedong. With greater gravitas than his immediate predecessors Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, Xi has put his stamp on the nation to a degree not seen since the days of Deng or Mao.

But just how impactful has Xi actually been? What does the balance sheet on his rule look like six years into a tenure that may be indefinite following his decision to remove term limits in March this year? What exactly has he accomplished? Where has he fallen short on promises or expectations? And, looking forward, where might China be headed under his rule?

**THE VISION THING**

Great leaders usually have grand visions. Xi has actually voiced his views on a wide variety of issues. In his 1,134-page, two-volume tome, *The Governance of China*, Xi has something to say on seemingly every subject. Yet, his core vision for China, which resonates deeply with the Chinese people, is actually not at all new. Like all Chinese leaders dating back to the Qing Self-Strengthening Movement of the 1870s, Xi’s prime objective is to achieve what he describes as “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” He has rebranded this longstanding national mission as the “Chinese Dream,” but the quest is no different: for China to acquire the material attributes of a major international power and the commensurate respect from others. The legacy of the country’s former weakness and humiliation thus continues to deeply haunt Xi and his generation. So too does the collapse of Communist Party rule in the former Soviet Union. Now having ruled almost as long as their Soviet counterparts, Xi and his peers in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) live in regular trepidation of a similar meltdown.

These two issues — augmenting China’s strengths and making China a major global power while rectifying the Communist Party’s weaknesses and preventing its institutional implosion — are intertwined in Xi’s thinking and dominate his agenda. For him, these meta-challenges are complementary, not contradictory. In his view, to strengthen the party is to strengthen China. Without a revitalized and invincible CCP, China will be unable to achieve its great rejuvenation. No strong party, no strong China, goes the logic.

ROLLING BACK DENG

In a significant way, though, the question is more about the means than the end. Xi is trying to take China forward by moving it backward. In many policy spheres, but particularly with regard to the party, Xi is retrogressive rather than progressive. His preferred leadership style and policy preferences are rooted in the Mao era and the early years of the People’s Republic. Indeed, there is an apparent element of neo-Stalinist style in his rule.

Xi clearly has nostalgia for the 1950s and early 1960s — a period of strong Soviet influence in China and a time when his own father was in the leadership — and he has resurrected many of the hallmarks of that period.

In so doing, Xi has been systematically rolling back many of Deng Xiaoping’s core reforms that have guided China’s leaders for the past four decades: no personality cult around the leader, collective leadership and consensual decision-making, bottom-up “inner-party democracy” rather than top-down *dikatat*, active feedback mechanisms from society to the party-state, relative tolerance of intellectual and other freedoms, limited dissent, some de facto checks and balances on unconstrained party power, fixed term limits and enforced retirement rules for leaders and cadres.

Deng also sought a society and economy that was open to the world and used a cautious foreign policy. These and other norms were central elements of Deng’s post-1978 reform program, and they all continued under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao — but all are being dismantled by Xi.

Xi wants to move China forward as a major power in the 21st century, but his means for doing so are deeply illiberal and harken back to a much earlier era. Like other nationalist/populist autocratic leaders around the world today, Xi rejects the linkage of progress with liberalism. Quite the contrary.

THE PARTY CONTROLS ALL

Xi is also a hardcore Leninist and in some ways a throwback to the Stalinist era. Above all, he believes in the absolute hegemonic power of — and control by — the Communist Party. Accordingly, he has launched many initiatives to strengthen the party. Soon after he came to power in 2012, he gave a speech in Guangdong warning that unless the CCP took drastic actions, given its multiple signs of atrophy, it too could face a Soviet-style collapse.

Xi believes deeply in ruling through party-led institutions and regulations. This is the essence of Leninism: penetration of all elements of state and society with party cells, like a microbe that permeates the entire body politic. Mao was like this before 1956 too, but subsequently became progressively distrustful of the party and later sought to decimate it with the Cultural Revolution. Following Mao’s destruction, Deng sought to rebuild party institutions, but at the same time, to devolve power within the party, between the party and the state, and from Beijing to lower levels. Deng fundamentally believed that *loosening* controls actually strengthened party legitimacy and longevity.
Xi has definitely succeeded in strengthening the party institutionally over the past five years — but is it fair to wonder whether he has not actually weakened it in the longer term? How long can these backwards actions endure in an increasingly globalized, wealthy and sophisticated society? Xi is trying to run the party like a military by giving orders to be followed.

Xi too is trying to save the party — as Deng did following the debacle of Maoism — but, unlike Deng, he is all about re-centralizing power in the party and at the national level, rather than devolving it to lower levels and empowering other actors in the system. As Xi tersely told the 19th Congress in October 2017: “The party controls all.” This is apparent in multiple ways, including the sweeping reorganization/recentralization of the State Council and Central Committee organs at the March 2018 National People’s Congress. These institutional reforms suggest a return to the Stalinist-style centralized bureaucratic controls that China inherited from the Soviet Union in the 1950s. The reassertion of the central planning system and the reemphasized role of the state sector in the economy also suggest a return to neo-Stalinist economic approaches. Both Mao (after 1958) and Deng (after 1978) sought to decentralize the party-state’s role in the economy — but not Xi. He wants to bring the party-state back into all aspects of national life.

**XI IS EVERYWHERE**
The CCP under Xi has also reached back to the Maoist, if not Stalinist, era by constructing a messianic personality cult around him. Maoist rhetorical throwbacks such as zhuxi (chairman), lingxiu (leader), hexin (core) and even da dao shou (great helmsman) are again commonly used to refer to Xi. Moreover, the official ideological canon of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” has now been enshrined in both the party and state constitutions. Xi kitsch is to be found in shops across the country; television programs celebrate his wise leadership; multimedia track his every utterance and activity; and his exhortations bombard the public daily through a ramped-up propaganda apparatus. Xi dominates policy-making by personally chairing all central Leading Groups and party and military organs. He has also emasculated the authority of Premier Li Keqiang. So dominant is Xi that Chinese politics have become a sycophantic echo chamber.

This personalization of political leadership in Xi combined with his institutional strengthening of the party-state creates a paradigm of what I call “Patriarchal-Leninism.” In these ways, Xi is very much a mid-20th century Leninist leader ruling a huge country in a globalized era during the early-21st century. He is ruling in a fashion not unlike a patriarchal mafia Don.

There would seem to be a significant contradiction here between Xi’s tactics, the realities of the modern world and China’s developmental needs. Since coming to power in 2012, Xi has sought to relatively close China’s doors rather than further opening them (all the while professing that China continues to follow the open-door policy). He has certainly cracked down on corruption in the party (and government and military), and has presided over the most draconian purges and political repression in China since the 1989-1992 post-Tiananmen period. There has been a significant tightening of the foreign investment and corporate operating environment, a sweeping suppression of civil society and foreign NGOs (most of which have abandoned China), stepped-up study of Marxism and an assertion of ideological controls over the entire educational sphere (especially universities), xenophobic campaigns against “hostile foreign forces,” strict enforcement of party-state controls on all media, new technological practices of pervasive public security surveillance, continued tightening of control over Xinjiang and Tibet and persecution of Christians and other organized religions.

These repressive and retrogressive policies have more in common with Maoism than Dengism. Moreover, they would all appear to be the actions of an insecure leader and ruling party, rather than secure and confident ones. There is thus a contradictory dichotomy between Xi, who exudes personal confidence, and his domestic policies and actions that suggest just the opposite.

**SIDE EFFECTS OF PUTTING THE PARTY FIRST**
To be certain, Xi has definitely succeeded in strengthening the party institutionally over the past five years — but is it fair to wonder whether he has not actually weakened it in the longer term? How long can these retrograde actions endure in an increasingly globalized, wealthy and sophisticated society? Xi is trying to run the party like a military by giving orders to be followed, rather than as an organization with
feedback mechanisms and procedures to curtail dictatorial practices.

There already exist numerous anecdotal examples of discontent with the way Xi is leading the country in several sectors of society, including within the party itself. Indeed, there appears to be an increase of simmering discontent. Xi is frequently lampooned as Winnie the Pooh, and acerbic Xi jokes circulate on the internet and social media (and are promptly taken down).

Xi’s signature anti-corruption campaign, which has ensnared more than a million allegedly corrupt party and state cadres plus more than 4,000 military officers, has also had the collateral side-effect of paralyzing multiple bureaucracies. Tingzhi, the Chinese call it: to “freeze up.” Bureaucrats and capable technocrats throughout the system have been freezing up out of the combined fear of being detained on corruption charges (real or trumped-up), being accused of not sufficiently supporting the Xi agenda or by simply feigning compliance.

When one examines Xi’s impact on the Chinese economy, his record is mixed. Yes, the “new normal” GDP growth rates continue to chug along at the mandated 6 percent, state investment continues to flow into fixed assets and more hard infrastructure, and China maintains near full employment with social stability. Xi has also launched programs to eliminate poverty by 2020, increase urbanization, spur innovation and high-tech manufacturing under the “Made in China 2025” program and expand coverage of social services.

On the environmental front, he has programs to build eco-cities, attack pollution and transition China to a green economy while decreasing desertification and increasing forestation. Xi has prioritized deleveraging China’s ballooned debt (now nearing 300 percent of GDP) while expanding domestic consumption and services as drivers of growth. These are all commendable goals and initiatives, but they are all just that. Time will tell whether they are achieved.

Yet, when one reviews the expansive and ambitious Third Plenum economic reform plan of November 2013 — the benchmark economic blueprint personally unveiled by Xi — his administration has come up way short. By virtually all foreign evaluations, only a meager 10-15 percent of the Third Plenum package has been implemented (despite much official rhetoric about “supply side structural reform”). The significance of this shortfall is that the Chinese economy is not making the multiple structural adjustments needed to navigate through the Middle Income Trap and up the value-added chain to become a developed economy over time. To make these adjustments, however, runs counter to Xi’s party/state-centric view of economic development and requires considerable decentralization and empowerment of non-state actors.

**BETTER MARKS FOR FOREIGN POLICY**

If there is one policy area where Xi deserves high marks, it is in foreign relations. China is not only seen as a global power but, in the wake of America’s withdrawal from global leadership under President Donald Trump, Beijing is now increasingly looked to as the predictable and responsible power in world affairs.

This is particularly true in so-called global governance — transnational issues managed mainly through international organizations. China had previously and accurately been criticized as a “free rider” in global governance by not contributing proportionately to China’s reservoir of human and financial capital. But Xi has taken a personal interest in global governance, convening several Politburo meetings to discuss it, speaking about it at numerous international forums and directing his subordinates to increase China’s involvement and contributions. As a result, China under Xi has really upped its game — contributing much more to the UN operating budget, global peacekeeping, overseas development assistance and the Millenium Development Goals, while China is active in a range of areas from combating public health pandemics to disaster relief, energy and sea lane security, counter-terrorism and anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and the South China Sea. Beijing has also created new lending institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and other global public goods.

Xi’s signature Belt and Road Initiative is also noteworthy. An infrastructure development initiative unparalleled in history, which claims more than 80 participating nations, BRI will build rail lines, pipelines, telecommunications networks, electric grids, deep-water ports, highways, new cities, and other needed infrastructure from Asia to Europe. While it remains several years premature to render an ultimate verdict on its relative successes or failures — and there will be both — BRI is another example of China’s new foreign policy activism under Xi.

Xi clearly has jettisoned Deng Xiaoping’s strategic dictum for China to “bide its time, hide strength, never take the lead,” which had guided China’s foreign policy since 1989 (when Deng made the statement), Xi instead argues that China should act like the great power that it is. Thus, under Xi, all corners of the globe have experienced the increased activism of Chinese diplomacy (bilateral and multilateral). To be sure, China’s international relationships are not all rosy — but they are, on balance, quite positive. Only with the United States, Australia, Japan and India can China’s bilateral ties be said to be poor and strained. Everywhere else they are sound or strong. This is more than russia or the US — the two other major powers — can claim.

Xi’s high marks in foreign affairs can also be given to China’s military and defense establishment — probably Xi’s No. 2 priority after strengthening the party over the past five years. In January 2016, under the new title of Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Xi launched a sweeping reorganization — the most comprehensive ever — of China’s military and paramilitary forces. The restructuring is but one part of systematic efforts to build a world-class military and, in Xi’s repeated exhortations, to “prepare to fight and win wars.”

**ON BALANCE**

Like all leaders, Xi’s balance sheet is a mixture of pluses, minuses, mixed results and uncertain outcomes. This variegated verdict is, however, at variance with the overwhelmingly positive portrayals proclaimed in China’s official media. In Beijing’s rendering, Xi can do no wrong. This in itself may prove to be his Achilles Heel. No leader is infallible. The subterranean grousing about Xi’s “imperial” leadership style now increasingly heard in China (and from Chinese when they go abroad and speak with foreigners), may be a harbinger of difficulties to come.

Having constructed a propagandistic caricature of an infallible Xi Jinping, the regime will find it very difficult — if not impossible — to deconstruct this irrational image of China’s new “great helmsman.” And there are many constituencies in China that have suffered from Xi’s policies — including more than a million party and state cadres and military officers who have lost their positions and privileges as a result of Xi’s anti-corruption purges — all of whom lie in wait for him to trip up.

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