

How are things going to go on under Xi's leadership?

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This is the issue:

In Beijing, the penultimate [Central Committee meeting](#) before next year's 20th Party Congress has just come to a close. Officially, the agenda for this week's nonpublic meeting of China's 200 or so party leaders focuses on an updated resolution on the history of the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP.

The bigger story, however, is how incumbent CCP leader Xi Jinping will continue to rule China going forward. What are his options?

Xi Jinping, seen on a big screen during the Communist Party's 100th anniversary celebrations in Beijing.

Source: [Washington Post](#)

Earlier this year, two veteran analysts of Chinese politics, Richard McGregor and Jude Blanchette, published a [comprehensive report](#), laying out several possible scenarios for the next leadership succession in China's new era. In two of these scenarios, Xi Jinping is out of the picture as the result of either a coup or 'unexpected death or incapacitation'. In the other two, he stays in power either by extending his tenure as the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to a third term or by retiring from that office but continuing to rule behind the scenes.

My research suggests yet another possibility for Xi to stay in power, which is however not specified in the said report. This possibility is



the reactivation of the office of the chairman of the Party Central Committee (Party Chairman) for Xi at the 2022 CCP Congress. The office would not be new, created from scratch, but would be based on precedent. This would not only help to build legitimacy but also draw a roadmap of how to get there. If Xi charts this course with success, the Party Chairman position would help him achieve two goals simultaneously: He could continue to rule while micromanaging the succession process.

This is what we need to know:

The reactivation of the party chairman title would not only allow Xi to continue to rule but also to rule from a higher place. This is a revered leadership role, created in 1945 for Mao Zedong, who retained that office until his death in 1976. So far, three CCP leaders have held that position: Mao Zedong (1945–76), Hua Guofeng (1977–81), and Hu Yaobang (1981–82). The office was created for Mao in 1945 at the seventh Party Congress and passed on to Hua after Mao's death, following a decisive coup against the 'Gang of Four' led by Hua himself and a few other Party leaders. Having obtained the supreme leadership, Hua, however, did little to strengthen his power base. Hence, when the opposition rallied against him, he resigned without putting up much of a fight, unable to finish even one term. The office was subsequently passed on to Hu, for the sake of continuity, only to be dissolved one year later when the eleventh Party Congress was held in 1982.

In the centenary of CCP history, the Party Chairman is de facto the only office of power that is held by an individual who is not bound by the founding organisational principle of the Party—that is, collective decision-making. After his elevation to the party chairman role, Mao made it clear that final decision-making power would stay with him. A [written instruction](#) he sent to CCP leaders Liu Shaoqi and Yang Shangkun in 1953 reads: "From now on, all documents and telegraphs that are

issued under the name of the Party Centre have to be reviewed by me first before circulation. Otherwise, they are invalid. Please bear it in mind."

As party chairman, Xi would have many options on the pace and manner of the search for his political heir. To start with, Xi's current position as general party secretary would become vacant and could be used to groom the heir-designate under the direct watch of the chairman. And as party chairman, Xi could now entrust his successor with the authority to oversee day-to-day CCP operations, yet retain veto power on critical matters of state. If he wanted to prolong the search, he could revoke the position of general secretary altogether so that a few equal candidates could compete within the Politburo Standing Committee. In addition, he might also consider nominating an heir by appointing a deputy party chairman, as Mao did.

There is no term limit on the office of Party Chairman—either in written rules or in unwritten conventions. The Party chairmanship is part of the 'trinity' of offices—an arrangement presented as an established CCP 'convention' by Jiang Shigong, a Schmidtian constitutional scholar who seems to have the ear of the Party's decision-makers.

Granted, the reactivation of the CCP chairmanship is [no guarantee](#) of a stable transition of power, as China's history has revealed. But in an autocratic regime with no genuine commitment to constitutionalism and the rule of law, nothing can guarantee a secure tenure, let alone life tenure, for any leader or their successor, no matter how the succession process is designed. The reactivation of this office would, however, provide a convenient structure that allows Xi as the incumbent leader to control the succession process and accommodate trial and error in the process.

This is of high relevance:

- Two developments seem to suggest that the CCP is geared toward this move. The

first signal, many experts think, is the [2018 constitutional amendment](#) that lifted China's two-term limit for the head of the state, namely, the Chairman of the People's Republic of China (PRC Chairman). This move was Xi's first overt preparatory measure to stay in power after his second term. It indicates either or both of two things: first, that he greatly values the ceremonial role of the head of the state; and second, that he has concerns about the possibility, if he has to pass on that office to someone else due to the term limit, that an overambitious PRC Chairman could potentially use that office to defect and turn its ceremonial functions to blocking powers, for instance, by holding off from promulgating laws, appointing and dismissing leaders of state institutions, signing treaties with foreign countries, etc., thereby significantly weakening the political dominance of Xi himself as the head of the CCP.

- The second and more compelling signal is the unfolding of an exceptionally vigorous ideological campaign to establish "[Xi Jinping Thought](#)." This campaign bears great resemblance to Mao's playbook before he became party chairman in 1945. At the time, Mao launched a four-year rectification campaign in Yan'an to build a namesake ideology. Mao used this campaign not only to canonize policies, orient actions and dispel political rivals and critics but also to demonstrate the excellence of Mao's political, military, and administrative skills as well as intellectual capacity. The campaign culminated with the very first resolution on CCP history, which rendered Mao as an infallible political leader, established his absolute authority over all aspects of CCP affairs and also sealed the position of party chairman for him. As if in a mirror image, the ideological campaign to establish Xi Jinping Thought kicked off during Xi's first term in office.

- Since 2017, the CCP's propaganda machine has been running at full throttle to canonize Xi's words and deeds into the theory of Xi Jinping Thought. This comprehensive theory, lauded in official statements as the "[latest achievement of the Sinification of Marxism](#)," has been turned into textbooks and training materials for mandatory study by [schoolchildren](#), college students, politicians and civil servants. According to its online database, the National Social Sciences Fund, the most generous and prestigious funding body for social sciences in China, sponsored over 370 research projects with Xi Jinping's name in the title between 2014 and 2020. The adulation of Xi Jinping has been pushed to new levels by China's [official Xinhua News Agency](#) and other official publications. But China watchers are keeping a close eye on the new resolution on the CCP's first 100 years.

This is my point of view:

Based on the preview of the newly passed resolution of CCP History, which was released in [the communique](#) last Friday, Xi is praised as an indispensable leader who will guide China to its national rejuvenation in the same measure as Mao was praised of having emancipated China from semi feudalism and colonialism and centuries of humiliations in the first resolution of CCP history passed in 1945. It took Mao less than two months from having the historical resolution passed to having himself inaugurated as the Party Chairman. Time is on Xi's side because he has still one year to implement his strategy and prepare for the 20th Party Congress. Since the reactivation of the Party Chairman would require the rewriting of the Party Charter, the next critical moment to watch is the seventh plenum meeting, which is the place where such motions shall be presented. The seventh plenum meeting is expected to take place in October 2022, one month ahead of the Party Congress.