

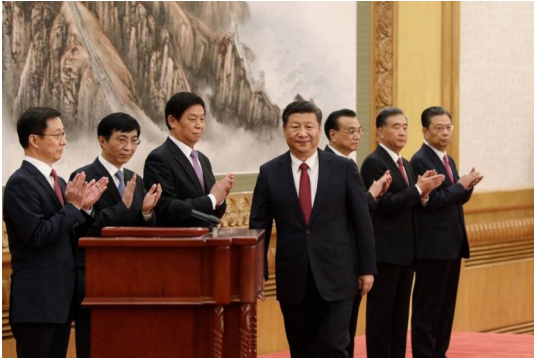
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CHINA

China Edges Closer to One-Man Rule

Party congress empowers President Xi Jinping without elevating a likely successor



WHO'S WITH XI: President Xi Jinping, center, strode by other members of the Communist Party's new Politburo Standing Committee in Beijing on Wednesday. Pictured from left, Han Zheng, Wang Huning, Li Zhanshu, Li Keqiang, Wang Yang and Zhao Leji. PHOTO: QILAI SHEN/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By *Jeremy Page and Chun Han Wong*

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BEIJING—The future of 1.4 billion people, the world's second-largest economy and an emerging military juggernaut now lies largely in the hands of just one man: China's President Xi Jinping.

In unveiling a new top leadership lineup without a potential successor to Mr. Xi on Wednesday, the Communist Party edged closer to resurrecting one-man rule, four decades after the death of Chairman Mao.

The parade of the seven-man Politburo Standing Committee onto a red-carpeted podium in Beijing's Great Hall of the People was the climax of a twice-a-decade process that placed Mr. Xi on a par with Mao in the party constitution and positioned him as pre-eminent leader even beyond his second five-year term.

Concentrating such power in Mr. Xi—who can now make policy and personnel choices virtually uncontested—draws to an emphatic end an era of collective leadership. It also represents a historic gamble.

Mr. Xi is calculating that strongman rule will make it easier to add China to the ranks of rich, global powers and to project Chinese power globally. An early test of the latter comes in just a few weeks, when U.S. President Donald Trump is due to visit Beijing.

The risk is a political culture that rewards loyalty over initiative, in which it is harder for the leadership to astutely address complex challenges.

“The biggest drawback of this power structure is that no one will dare to tell him the truth: There could be an emperor's-new-clothes situation,” said Zhang Lifan, an independent historian and political commentator. “If there is a crisis in the future, he might not get the necessary information.”

That would be dangerous, given China's critical role in the standoff over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and its outsize influence on the global economy and world financial markets.

China's Leaders: Who's With Xi



Mr. Xi, who is 64 years old, has offered few details of how he will exercise his enormous powers. "I see this as approval of my work, and even more encouragement that will spur me on," he said in a speech after introducing the new Standing Committee in a ceremony shown live on state television.

The leadership revamp effectively endorsed the revival of autocratic rule in a

country where emperors wielded absolute power for centuries, and where Mao's brutal dictatorship caused tens of millions of deaths through famine and the turbulence of political purges.

After Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping began to liberalize the economy and develop norms for retirement and power-sharing, which evolved further after the Cold War's end to avoid the gerontocracy and bureaucratic sloth that contributed to the Soviet Union's collapse.

By the time Mr. Xi took power in 2012, however, the party had been thrown into disarray by a scandal surrounding one-time political highflier Bo Xilai.

Red Stars Rising

China's Communist Party inaugurated a new leadership team following a twice-a-decade congress.



Source: staff reports

Mr. Xi became convinced that what led to the Soviet Union's dissolution was a lack of strong party leadership. "In the end nobody was a real man, nobody came out to resist," he said in an internal speech shortly after taking power, according to people who saw an official summary of his remarks.

Most striking in the new leadership slate unveiled on Wednesday was the absence of any member of the next generation of leaders, now in their 50s. That was the strongest indication yet that Mr. Xi plans to rule for the long haul.

Under recent practice at the twice-a-decade congress, the party has retired leaders over 67 and elevated to the Standing Committee at least one potential successor for the top post five years before he would take power, to ensure a smooth transition. By those norms, none of the new Standing Committee members are young enough to succeed Mr. Xi and rule for two five-year terms.

"Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping each needed decades to achieve their accomplishments," said Ding Xueliang, a China politics expert at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. "Xi Jinping still needs to consolidate his gains and needs

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more time to achieve his goals.”

Premier Li Keqiang, whose powers have been severely curtailed, remained on the top body. Three of the five new members have close ties to Mr. Xi.

Mr. Xi also now has

trusted lieutenants in the new Politburo, the party's top 25 leaders, and the broader 376-member Central Committee, which includes ministers, state industry chiefs, senior military officers and local government heads.

In his first term, Mr. Xi has steadily amassed power and sidelined rivals by taking direct control of the economy and the military, assuming new titles and overseeing an anticorruption campaign that targeted senior figures and their families.

Mr. Xi has now declared the start of a new era defined by strong leadership and more balanced development, instead of the unbridled growth under Deng, as a way to preserve party rule far into the 21st century.

One Nation Under Xi Jinping



Officials at all levels have been quick to demonstrate enthusiasm.

Renmin University in Beijing, one of China's top schools, on Wednesday established a new research center dedicated to the study of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism With Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”—the political theory that was just inscribed in the party charter.

The theory sets out a long list of vaguely worded principles, including “a people-centered approach,” “a new vision for development,” “seeing that the people run the country” and “upholding socialist core values.”

It will be a big task to turn these broad goals into specific guidelines that China's bureaucracy will follow.

“Xi needs local leaders to implement his policies, and he thinks that corruption crackdowns are the key to implementation, in a theory of ‘if only they would do what I say.’” said Ryan Manuel, an expert on Chinese politics at the University of Hong Kong. “It isn't that simple.”

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