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# CHINA Chinese Power Play: Xi Sets Stage for a More Muscular Role at Home and Abroad

China's president is likely to emerge from a Communist Party congress with enhanced powers—but will he step down in 2022?

By *Jeremy Page, Lingling Wei and Chun Han Wong*

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BEIJING—Chinese President Xi Jinping is set to emerge from a Communist Party congress that started Wednesday with all of the allies and authority he needs to monopolize decision making for the next five years.

The affirmation of Mr. Xi's political supremacy suggests he will double down on a drive to reassert party control at home, and project power abroad, during a second term likely to be marked by a slowing economy and volatile foreign relations, especially over North Korea.

Beyond that looms the question: Will he step down come 2022?

The twice-a-decade congress is expected to endorse Mr. Xi's rise to a level of political control in modern China comparable only to Deng Xiaoping or Mao Zedong. Both remained dominant figures till death.

As well as packing top party posts with Mr. Xi's lieutenants, the 2,280 delegates are expected to enshrine his political theory in the party's constitution and grant him even tighter control over China's armed forces, political insiders and analysts say.

## The Great Reshuffle

China's Communist Party is undergoing a shakeup of its top leadership bodies at a twice-a-decade congress starting on October 18.

■ Purged for corruption Expected to retire Expected to remain uncertain

**POLITBURO STANDING COMMITTEE (TOTAL MEMBERS: 7)**

Expected to retire: 4 to 5



Xi Jinping, 64  
Li Keqiang, 62  
Wang Qishan, 69  
Zhang Dejiang, 76  
Yu Zhengsheng, 72  
Liu Yunshan, 70  
Zhang Gaoli, 70

**POLITBURO** Includes Standing Committee, plus top two generals, 25 to 31  
**EXPECTED MEMBERS:** heads of major party departments and leaders of major provinces and cities

**CENTRAL** Includes Politburo plus state industry chiefs, provincial

**EXPECTED TO RETIRE:** leaders and senior generals

**TOTAL MEMBERS:**

Source: staff reports

And the congress could go further, opening a window for 64-year-old Mr. Xi to stay in power after his second term expires, political insiders say, despite retirement norms to protect against one-man rule.

Expectations that he will break with precedent by blocking a potential successor from joining the Politburo Standing Committee, the top leadership body, have mounted since one of two leading candidates was suddenly fired in July.

“The issue of potentially extending Xi’s tenure will be discussed,” according to one person directly involved in preparations for the congress. The person said the idea would be proposed by a senior party figure who would praise Mr. Xi’s achievements.

Another possibility is that Mr. Xi gets a new title he could keep beyond 2022, such as party chairman—which was most closely associated with Mao.

China’s government press office didn’t respond to questions on whether such discussions would take place or any other expected outcomes of the congress.

#### One Nation Under Xi Jinping



Mr. Xi, in a speech at the opening of the congress on Wednesday in Beijing, hailed the achievements of the last five years and called on party members to “secure a decisive victory” in building a modern, prosperous, socialist nation in the “new era.”

“We have solved many tough problems that were long on the agenda but never resolved, and accomplished many things that were wanted but

never got done,” he said.

“What we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life.”

In recent weeks, Chinese authorities have gone to lengths reminiscent of the Mao era in lavishing praise on Mr. Xi’s muscular leadership and his “China Dream” to rejuvenate the nation.

That resonates with many Chinese, who saw his predecessor, Hu Jintao, as out of touch and unable to protect China’s international interests.

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“Xi Jinping is different from other Chinese leaders,” said Zhai Yifan, a 32-year-old railway engineer visiting a Beijing exhibition focused on Mr. Xi’s achievements. “As a Chinese person, this makes me feel proud.”

Still, that doesn’t translate into unanimous popular support for Mr. Xi staying on after 2022. There are no official public-opinion surveys on that issue, let alone independent ones, but at the Beijing exhibition, views were mixed, with Mr. Zhai and several others saying they opposed the idea.

Otherwise, it could signal a return to “lifelong rule,” said Du Jingqi, a 63-year-old retiree at the exhibition.

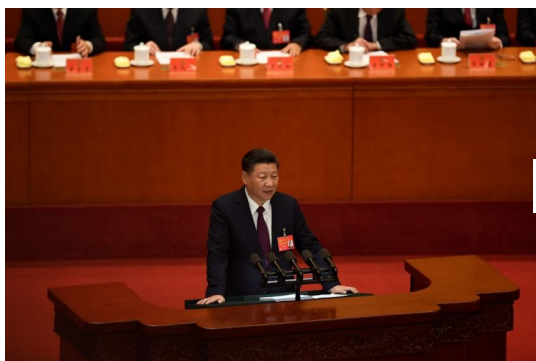
Internationally, Mr. Xi is expected to continue asserting China’s territorial claims and expanding its military activities, while positioning China as a champion of global trade through its Belt and Road Initiative to build new East-West trade and transport links.

U.S. officials hope Mr. Xi will take bolder action to help halt North Korea’s nuclear program and open Chinese markets, and will look for signals when President Donald Trump visits China in early November.

Back home, the challenge for Mr. Xi will be delivering the improvements many Chinese now expect in areas such as education, health care and the environment.

## Photos: The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China

Weeklong session is expected to end with President Xi Jinping more in control than ever



Chinese President Xi Jinping at the opening session of the twice-a-decade Communist Party Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Wednesday. The weeklong gathering is expected to go beyond handing Mr. Xi a second five-year term by conferring a level of authority comparable to that enjoyed by Deng Xiaoping or Mao Zedong, who dominated politics until they died. WANG ZHAO/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGE

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Enhanced powers allow Mr. Xi, in theory, to make painful decisions needed to shift China to more sustainable growth, such as trimming excess in state companies. The flip side of Mr. Xi's emphasis on strengthening party control is a clampdown on dissent, which discourages officials and advisers from questioning policy or experimenting with new ideas.

Despite a 2013 pledge to let market forces play a "decisive role" in the economy, Mr. Xi has kept credit flowing to the inefficient state sector to meet a goal of doubling gross domestic product over 10 years, in time for the centenary of the party's founding, in 2021.

Many political insiders say Mr. Xi is more likely to focus on bolstering the party's role in society and the economy rather than unleashing market forces in his second term.

As the son of a revolutionary, Mr. Xi "sees himself on a historical mission," said Sebastian Heilmann, president of the Mercator Institute for China Studies. "First, making party rule fit and resilient for the 21st century. Second, transforming China into a global power that reshapes the power balances and rules of the game in international relations."

Delegates to the congress will spend much of the next several days in discussions behind closed doors before selecting a new Central Committee, the party's top 375 or so officials. That body then selects a new Politburo—the top 25 leaders—and the Politburo Standing Committee, the party's inner sanctum that currently has seven members, up to five of whom are expected to retire.

Based on past protocol, Mr. Xi will lead the new top slate single-file onto a red-carpeted podium in the Great Hall of the People, probably on Oct. 25.

Despite tensions over economic policy in recent years, it now seems highly likely Premier Li Keqiang will stay on, although his decision-making powers have been

China's Leaders: Who's With Xi?



severely curtailed, according to party insiders.

Recent speculation has focused instead on Wang Qishan, the 69-year-old anticorruption chief who by many is seen as China's de facto No. 2 leader. The custom since 2002 has been that leaders over 67 retire at a congress, though last year a senior party official denied that such a norm exists.

If Mr. Wang stays on, that creates precedent for Mr. Xi to remain in power beyond 2022, when he will be 69. It also keeps a crucial Xi ally on the slate, though some in the party say Mr. Xi has grown wary of the credit given to Mr. Wang for the antigraft campaign that has punished more than a million people.

Add to the intrigue the distraction provided by a Chinese businessman, Guo Wengui, who has lobbed allegations of corruption and other misdeeds from New York against various Chinese leaders, including Mr. Wang. In 2012, the scandal surrounding fallen party star Bo Xilai loomed over the party congress; anxious to avoid a similar cloud, Beijing has sought to discredit Mr. Guo and is seeking his arrest.

Standing committee members used to be selected by outgoing and retired members, but Mr. Xi has curbed the influence of his peers and elders. He may still have to make compromises, political insiders say, but he should be able to block anyone he considers disloyal or a threat to his authority.

He could also abandon recent party practice, which suggests the new Standing Committee should include at least one person young enough to succeed him in 2022 and serve another 10 years based on current retirement norms.

Sun Zhengcai was one of only two people on the current Politburo who fitted the bill —until he was fired in July as party chief of the southwestern city of Chongqing, the same post held by Bo Xilai.

Mr. Sun, 54, was expelled from the party last month and accused by its investigators of a long list of misdeeds, including trading power for sex, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

Mr. Sun was succeeded in Chongqing by Chen Min'er, who is 57 and widely considered to be among Mr. Xi's political favorites, having worked under him in the 2000s in the eastern province of Zhejiang.

If Mr. Xi does have to compromise by allowing a potential successor to join the Standing Committee, political insiders say it could be Mr. Chen although he is not yet on the Politburo and leapfrogging over that step would be unusual.

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