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## Reports

# The Maozedongism of Chinese Politics and the Xi Factor

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As part of his critical paradigm of political systems in the West as well as in the East in the 21st century, sociologist and political scientist Stein Ringen proposes another nuanced reflection of a two-part study of the challenges of global democracy. Back in February, the first paper “When America’s Democracy Needs a Health-Check: Polarization and the Trump Factor” focused on the Trump factor in the decline of American democracy. Now, the second paper addresses how China has proceeded with its own political transformation in 2018. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has decided to add Chinese President Xi Jinping’s political thought and the National Supervision System into the country’s constitution.<sup>(1)</sup> As Ringen wrote in a recent publication, “the modern Chinese state does not rely on being forbidding to its people in their daily lives. Indeed, ordinary Chinese now have many freedoms that no one interferes with. But the state has its red lines and does forbid what cannot be accepted: interference in Party affairs and organizing outside of the Party apparatus.”<sup>(2)</sup>

According to the author, Xi Jinping has proved himself the most formidable leader in China after Mao. The first bastion for Xi to topple was pragmatism. Under his watch, all the reins of dictatorship have been tightened. The second bastion to fall was collective leadership. At the Party Congress in October 2017, he had his “thought” inscribed in the Party’s Constitution, lifting himself on to the pedestal previously occupied only by Mao. The Chinese state is now under the control of an ideologically inspired regime with straight lines of command from the Party top and down.

The first paper can be accessed through this link:

<http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/02/americas-democracy-health-check-polarization-trump-factor-180225110753729.html>

“Western leaders and analysts have often projected on to China an image of their preferred imaginings, seeing it through the rose-colored glasses of the West.” So writes Kevin Rudd, former Prime Minister of Australia, now President of the Asia Society Policy Institute.<sup>(3)</sup> He speaks from forty years of engagement with China, as an observer and a participant, and articulates the propensity to misunderstanding of the People’s Republic of China – the PRC – among those who look in from outside.

## The Turn-around that Never Happened

The Chinese state is in the hands of a regime that claims the right to rule by force of its 1949 civil war victory and revolution. It sees itself to be the order that can hold China united and strong. It is a regime with a single supreme determination: the perpetuation of the regime itself. The People's Republic of China is a political project.

Some of the imaginings that Westerners project on to China have their origins in a misunderstanding of the PRC's great reformer, Deng Xiaoping, who emerged as the leader after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. China was then, after the disasters of the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), in ruins. The state was financially bankrupt and the regime bereft of authority. His mission was to salvage the regime. His method was pragmatic and collective leadership.

The Western expectation now was that a new People's Republic was in the making. It was assumed Deng had purged the regime of the burden of ideology and set it on a path of economic pragmatism, that the People's Republic had been converted into an economic project.

That, however, never happened. It was not Deng's intention. He was explicit about that and outsiders would have seen it if they had listened to what he said. While opening up the economy, politically Deng laid down "four cardinal principles:" to uphold the socialist path, to uphold the people's democratic dictatorship, to uphold the leadership of the Communist Party, and to uphold Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism, principles he then had enshrined in the Party's Constitution. The People's Republic was to remain a political project.

## Enter Xi Jinping

Xi Jinping has proved himself the most formidable leader in China after Mao and has reshaped the regime to such a degree that it is now common to see his reign as the third phase for the People's Republic, after those of Mao and Deng and followers. But, this reshaping, although drastic, is still a case of continuity. Under Xi, the People's Republic is becoming what was supposed to be from on the onset, but had deviated from in the process. Deng's reforms had made that possible. When Xi came to power in 2012, the economy was booming. "Unity" had been consolidated by the crackdown in 1989 in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and an unknown number of other cities, in a message to the people not to be misunderstood: you may hope for prosperity; but, liberty is not available. The state was fiscally solid and in control at home and strong abroad.

## Dictatorship at Home

The first bastion for Xi to topple was pragmatism. Under his watch, all the reins of dictatorship have been tightened. Censorship, internet control, repression of activism, persecution of human rights lawyers, propaganda, political education, surveillance – all that is notched up. Ideological fervor has returned with vengeance, in the form of Xi's now omnipresent "China Dream" (Zhongguo meng) of national rejuvenation and greatness. Under Mao, the ideology was revolution. That is no more. Under Deng, there was no ideology, only economic growth. That is no longer enough. Xi's ambition needs a narrative, and the narrative that works for him is nationalism.

Domestic control is dictatorial, sophisticatedly dictatorial, but dictatorial nevertheless. "Stability maintenance" is omnipresent but also practiced with strategic skill and economy. This is not a dictatorship that forbids more than it needs to forbid. I have called it a "controlocracy." Many people can probably feel that they for the most part can go about their daily lives as they please – provided they are able to accommodate to the absence of liberty. As I wrote in my recent book, Chinese controlocracy is "so smooth that in some respects it doesn't even look dictatorial... Most dictatorships are very clumsy, raw, inelegant. But this one isn't. They have it sussed."

Daily life for ordinary Chinese remains saturated by interference and control by state authorities. A Chinese reads his newspaper and is able to read what has been allowed on to print by the censors. Likewise museum exhibitions, plays, films, and books. What is on offer is what has survived prior censorship. So also with the internet. What is available there is what has not been weeded out by key-word purges, and what has been manipulated in by the state's 2 million 'internet opinion analysts.' It is true that it is possible to get around The Great Firewall and access the international web, but it is not easy. It takes time, work, determination and technical sophistication, and is not practically feasible for the millions who surf the Chinese web on their smartphones.

You buy a train or plane ticket and your ID is entered in the system to be flagged up if the security services think you are a person who should not leave town. You are a school boy or girl and the history you can learn is that sanctioned by the Party. From the next school year, Xi Jinping Thought will be on the curriculum. You are a student, or young academic, and you must attend obligatory political training. Because of the strictures of the household registration system, you cannot yourself decide where to live in the territory, say in a city rather than the countryside. If you migrate to a city for work, you are likely to be illegal, exploited and without social rights. If you have savings and want them to be safe, you deposit in a state bank, which rewards you with lower than market interest. This is one of various hidden taxes in the 'socialist market economy' – the most important ones being extractions through the labor market and land management – that result in an effective tax burden of upwards of 60 percent.<sup>(4)</sup> You are a peasant and hold your land at the

discretion of your village government (technically the collective) and are in danger of being thrown off it if officials decide it is needed for industrial or commercial use. If you two years ago were a practicing human rights lawyer, it is likely that you today are out of business or have been in confinement. You are a couple and you want a child: you must obtain a prior 'birth permit' from the state authorities, otherwise your child is illegal. You go into a photocopy shop in Beijing and must count on the shop being connected electronically to the local police station to keep an eye on the possible copying of illegal material.<sup>(5)</sup> And, of course, if you are classified as oppositional, your phone is listened to and your emails read, if, that is, you are not in, possibly illegal, house arrest or prison.



## THE 2012-2017 POLITBURO STANDING COMMITTEE

### XI JINPING



- General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)
- President of the People's Republic of China
- Chairman of the Central Military Commission
- "Core" leader of the CCP
- Portfolio: Party, state, and military affairs; foreign relations

### LI KEQIANG



- Premier of the State Council
- Portfolio: Macroeconomic policy

### WANG QISHAN



- Chairman of the Central Disciplinary Commission
- Portfolio: Anti-corruption

### ZHANG GAOLI



- First-ranked Vice Premier of the State Council
- Portfolio: Macroeconomic policy

### LIU YUNSHAN



- First-ranked Secretary of the Central Secretariat
- Portfolio: Propaganda

### ZHANG DEJIANG



- Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress
- Portfolio: Legislative affairs; Hong Kong & Macau affairs

### YU ZHENGSHEG



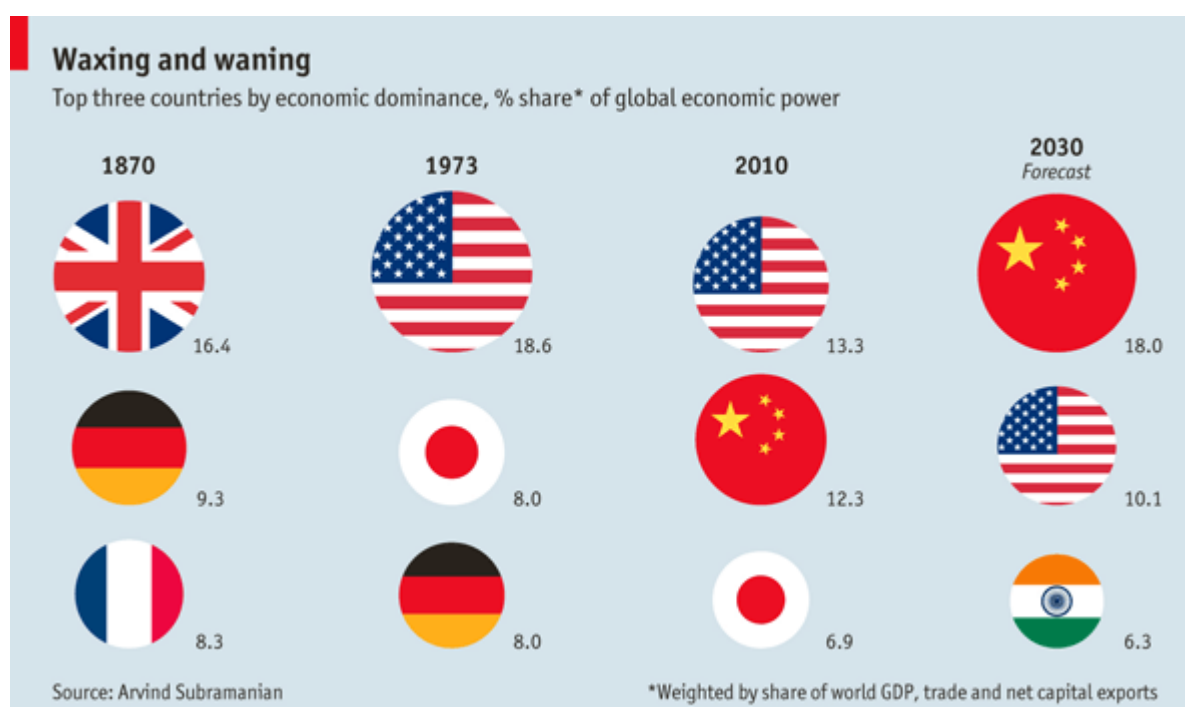
- Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)
- Portfolio: Liaising with United Front (eight sanctioned opposition political parties); Taiwan affairs

### [Global Policy Watch]

Try to organize outside of the Party system and you will be stopped. It is not necessary for activism to be directed against the system for it to be seen as dangerous. It is the fact of organization outside of Party control that is dangerous. It is official policy to combat corruption, but anti-corruption activism is still dangerous. It is official policy to protect the rights of women, but activism for women's rights is still dangerous. When some small groups of feminists in early 2015 organized coordinated demonstration in several cities against sexual harassment on public transport, the demonstrations were broken up and leaders detained. Their sin was not in the cause they were advancing but in creating a network between cities and organizing coordinated action. This is not to mention the total 'surveillance state', which is coming into place in Xinjiang featuring both old-fashioned

labor camps and all nature of modern electronic surveillance.(6) Or, anywhere across the land, the avalanche of propaganda and regime self-promotion that falls down upon you day in and day out.

When the economy was opening up for enterprise and embraced modernization, it was thought in the West that this would have to follow through to political opening up. But, that was a case of 'preferred imaginings.' China is different. The emerging middle class should have made itself a voice of liberal reform, but the entrepreneurs were instead co-opted into the Party apparatus and have made themselves the regime's warmest friends. The internet should have become a wedge for opening up from below; but, has instead been made into another tool of control from above.



[Arvind Subramanian/the Economist]

## Domination Abroad

On the international stage, the PRC has established itself more as a competitor than a collaborator. The most confident regime in today's world is on a quest for domination. That quest is obvious for all to see in the region. The rule of law in Hong Kong is being nibbled at.(7) Taiwan is threatened with annexation, in which matter the will of the people of a democratic country is to count for nothing. In the South China Sea, 3 of 3.5 million square kilometers have de facto been turned into Chinese territorial waters, in contravention of international law and a ruling of the Tribunal of the Law of the Sea, with island bases, some of them military, being built in other countries' waters. Australia and New Zealand are on the forefront of China's purchase of influence, in persistent interference in politics, media and universities, described in a recent Australian book as a "silent invasion." (8) Domination is at the heart of the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi's personal brainchild. This is a monumental program of investments in transport routes and infrastructure facilities, as



spikes in a wheel with Beijing the hub, now with projects in at least 68 countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe, and counting. What this program is building is a global structure of power. Other countries are linked physically to China, but also financially. They get investments but in the process become big-scale debtors in dependency on China.(9)

Beijing is (perhaps) not intent on imposing its model on others. However, it is imposing something else: silence. If you want to collaborate, be you a business, an organization, or a government, you are not allowed to say or do what the men in Beijing see to be unfriendly. Preferably, you should speak and act in favor of the China model and its ideas and achievements, but failing that at least without criticism or offence.

The use of influence and pressure to this effect is central to China's foreign policy. The detailed and persistent nature of which (in Europe) is described in a recent report by the German Mercator Institute for China Studies: "China's rapidly increasing political influencing efforts in Europe and the self-confident promotion of its authoritarian ideals pose a significant challenge to liberal democracy. China commands a comprehensive and flexible influencing toolset, ranging from the overt to the covert, primarily deployed across three arenas: political and economic elites, media and public opinion, and civil society and academia. European states increasingly tend to adjust their policies in fits of 'preemptive obedience' to curry favor with the Chinese side. EU unity has suffered from Chinese divide and rule tactics, especially where the protection and projection of liberal values and human rights are concerned. Beijing also benefits from the 'services' of willing enablers among European political and professional classes who are happy to promote Chinese values and interests."(10)

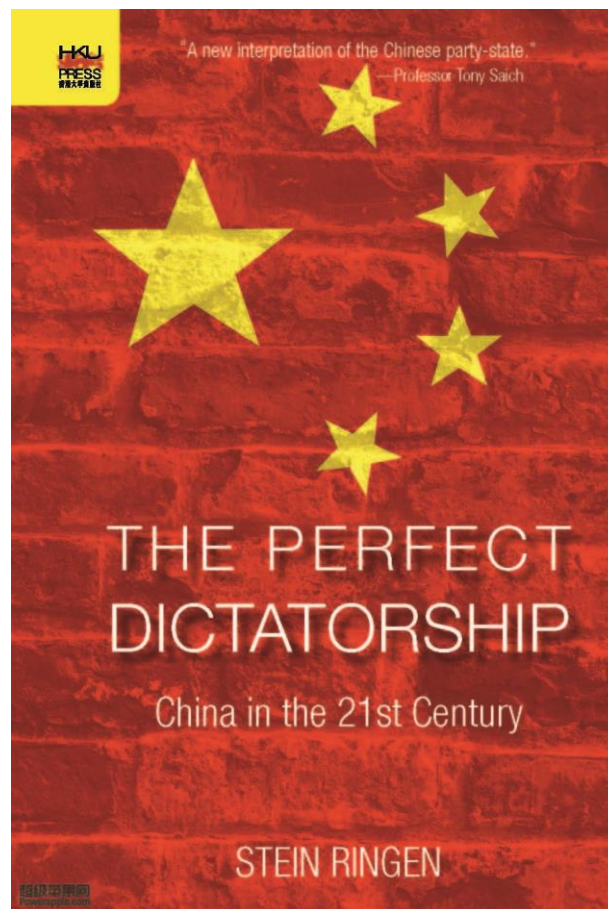
One country that found itself on the receiving end of this influence is Norway. Last year, China and Norway 'normalized' relations (which had been cut off for six years after the Nobel Peace Prize had been awarded to the human rights activist Liu Xiaobo). For 'normalization', the Norwegian government had to promise, in writing, to undertake no action that could disturb the new harmony between the two governments.

A business subjected to Beijing's policy of influence is Mercedes-Benz. The company happened to mention the Dalai Lama in promotional material outside of China, for which it met criticism in China. Its biggest foreign market in danger, the company first promised to "take steps to deepen our understanding of Chinese culture and values." That, however, was not enough and the company found itself branded "an enemy of the Chinese people" in the People's Daily. This incident led it to issue a second apology for "the hurt and grief that its negligent and insensitive mistake has caused the Chinese people."

Non-governmental organizations under influence include Greenpeace, the World Wide Fund for Nature, and Conservation International who all, to not risk exclusion from

operations in China, have remained silent on China's environmental destructions in the South China Sea.(11)

Educational institutions on the receiving end include 525 universities that host Confucius Institutes and 1113 schools that host Confucius Classrooms. These Institutes and Classrooms are Chinese state institutions that come with Chinese money, embedded in universities and schools in now 146 countries, in a program that started in 2004. Their stated purpose is to contribute to Beijing's global effort to, in Xi Jinping's words, get "China stories told well" and to contribute to "overseas propaganda" (propaganda is not a bad word in Beijing's terminology) for increasing soft power.(12)



## The Return to One-man Rule

The second bastion to fall was collective leadership. From day one, Xi occupied all leading offices of the party-state and created additional offices in the form of new 'leading groups' with himself as chair. His personal standing has been gradually elevated. He became "core leader." He had the top military brass swear loyalty to him personally.(13) Then, at the Party Congress in October 2017, he had his 'thought' inscribed in the Party's Constitution, lifting himself on to the pedestal previously occupied only by Mao. Finally, in March 2018 the National People's Congress (the legislature) removed the time restriction of 10 years on the presidency from the State Constitution (a Deng-period restriction of pragmatism), in a symbolic act of consolidating Xi as the undisputed supreme leader.



Less visibly, perhaps, but not less importantly, Xi has orchestrated extensive bureaucratic restructurings of concentrated power, in the country to Beijing, in Beijing to the Party, and in the Party to himself. The 2018 People's Congress rubber-stamped an overhaul of the state apparatus to streamline Party control. Some of Xi's new "leading groups" were elevated to "commissions." Control over the anti-corruption campaign is being centralized into a new 'supervisory commission,' described by the China-law scholar Jerome Cohen as "Inquisition with Chinese characteristics."<sup>(14)</sup> There has never been a state bureaucracy like the Chinese one. It has at least 75 million people on the payroll. This is now a Leviathan with straight lines of command from the Party top and down.

## Xi Jinping's First Mistake

In his first five years as China's leader, Xi Jinping did not make a single mistake. He fortified Party control at home and boosted China's power internationally, all the while reaping gratitude from his own population and respect abroad. He made his achievements with sure-footed and deliberate governance. There were no big bangs or great leaps, no discontinuity, no break with the past, only dogged persistence and relentless step-by-step management.

Then, the 10-year limit on office in the presidency was removed from the State Constitution, thereby opening up for Xi to remain leader beyond his hitherto stipulated period. His 'coup' was not necessary. Xi could have managed this matter with the deliberate caution that has, so far, been the hallmark of his leadership. However, he, to almost universal surprise, cast caution aside. Why? Because he was bound to, because power corrupts, because he has amassed so much power in his own hands that it was only a matter of time before he let hubris get the better of him.

In a comment on the eve of the Party Congress (for the Asia Society in New York) I wrote: "A prudent leader would rest on his laurels and use his powers for other purposes, such as to reform the economy. But, Xi has brewed for himself a dangerous cocktail of personal power, ideology, and propaganda. He is a man with a mission, a believer in his mission, surrounded by other believers, and with a population, at least in his own eyes, of believers. When has any leader, dizzy with power and success, able to bend history, experiencing love and adulation, been able to say to himself: enough?"<sup>(15)</sup>

Xi has committed a threefold-mistake. First, he has pulled the curtain aside and let the outside world see the regime as it is. It has been an eye-opener. Suddenly, stability management and Party discipline is seen for what it is. The 'China Dream,' far from an innocent slogan, is seen to be an ideology of nationalistic assertiveness. The Belt and Road Initiative is not a modern day Marshall Plan but the building of a structure of power with Beijing pulling other countries into its orbit of domination.

Second, he has given others inside the regime reason for resentment. That includes those who might have aspired to power after Xi's normal term and who have now been told that the only avenue of advancement is through the friendship of the present supremo. It also includes those who believe in the wisdom of an autocratic regime having arranged for orderly transitions of leadership. They know, from the Maoist disasters, that the regime has a built-in potential to self-destruct and that term-limits are a way of dealing with its own vulnerability. Xi has re-exposed the beloved regime to a danger it had recognised and dealt with.

Third, he has exposed his own leadership to the danger of adventurism. In casting collective leadership aside, he has freed himself from any checks on his rule. Any political leader anywhere who holds unquestionable power is a dangerous leader, all the more so if he is in command of heavy economic and military resources. He is exposed to overconfidence, to believing he can do as he wishes, and to rash and careless action. Xi has displayed this leaning in his coup against the constitution.

### **Neo-totalitarianism à la Chinoise**

To describe the PRC as a dictatorship is not controversial. That is even its self-description in its own constitution. But a totalitarian dictatorship?

When I published my study of the Chinese state, *The Perfect Dictatorship*, in 2016, I found that most criteria of totalitarianism were in place, but not definitely.<sup>(16)</sup> I therefore hedged my description: "near-totalitarian" or "with many totalitarian features." Now, with Xi's transformation of the regime, hedging is no longer needed. Instead of collective leadership, there is straight Party command, one-man rule, and person cult. Instead of pragmatism, there is ideologically inspired-determination.

A totalitarian state operates under the authority of a commanding ideology that explains its mission and justifies its hold on power. When Xi launched the 'China Dream' shortly after taking up office in 2012, it was not clear whether this was ideology in the making or just another slogan that the Chinese leaders are experts in deploying. We now know it was serious. His 'dream' is "the greatest dream of the Chinese nation," and its "great rejuvenation" – note of the nation. This narrative is now everywhere in policy-making and public life to give national and global policies meaning and direction. It is the inspiration of the PRC's new global assertiveness.

The People's Republic of China represents a challenge to liberal democracy. Xi and Co promote their 'model' in the world as superior in delivery and problem solving to what is seen as dithering democracy. It is a challenge to the existing world order and to those of us for whom this order works well. This is a supremely important question of our time: what kind of state is the Chinese state?

To answer that question, we need to look at China through hard-nosed analysis rather than 'rose-colored glasses.' Under Xi's leadership, the People's Republic is coming into its own. Xi Jinping is a believer. He believes in the revolution of 1949. He believes in the red aristocracy's right and duty to rule. He believes in the Leninist state as the right instrument of governance. He believes in the mission of Chinese greatness in the world. In the PRC equation of order and greatness, personal liberty is not a factor. The world looks to China and sees an economic giant. But, the China they ought to see is a political giant. Xi Jinping's political project is audacious. His determination is to make totalitarianism work.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cu0FKLME11g>

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