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China's 20th National Party Congress



The 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party Photo Credit: Government of China

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The 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party Photo Credit: Government of China

On Saturday, October 16, 2022, 2,296 delegates of China's ruling Communist Party descended on Beijing for the country's biggest political event: the Party Congress. These delegates represent the more than 90 million members of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as the 1.7 billion citizens living in Mainland China. Their goal - to determine the political future of China.

A unique event, Party Congresses occur every 5 years, with the last happening in 2017 when Xi entered his second term as President. Typically, very little is known about what occurs during these meetings. The authorities in Beijing have strong systems in place to prevent information from leaking out prior to when (and if) they decide it should be made public. That said, the information that did come out of this meeting paints a clear picture about the direction China is moving in.

Xi Jinping, now firmly entrenched as China's strongest authoritarian leader since Mao Zedong, succeeded in receiving a mandate for his unprecedented bid for a third term as leader, breaking a precedence that has existed since for almost two decades. Xi's predecessors—Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (more about him later)—both only served two terms before retiring from the Politburo Standing Council (China's version of the presidential cabinet but with more authority and no checks on its power). This predictable system effectively gave leadership stability to the people of China and routinized a transfer of power, preventing damaging power struggles from occurring as they did in the aftermath of Mao Zedong's death in 1976.



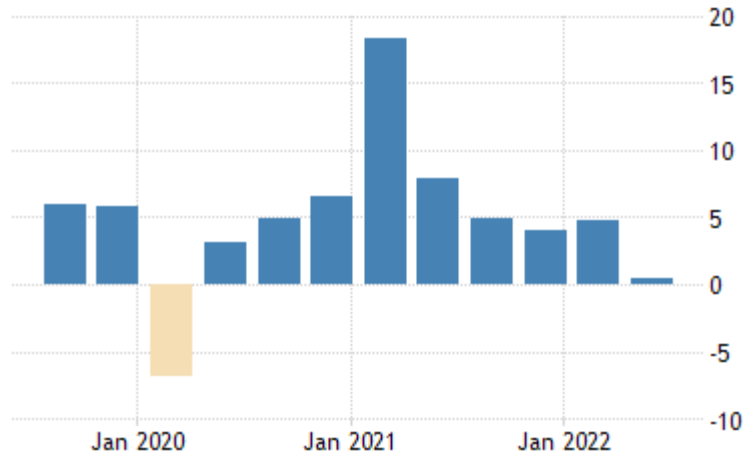
Xi Jinping with his predecessors Hu Jintao (left) and Jiang Zemin Photo Credit: Reuters

The Party Congress also effectively marked the last major engagement of Li Keqiang—the second most powerful figure in the Party. As Premier, Li is nominally the second most powerful member of the government and head of the State Council. Having served two full terms alongside Xi, Li is unable to run for a third. It is important to note that within the Communist Party there are two factions. One is centered around Xi. The other (to which Li Keqiang belongs) is called the Tuanpai. These factions are not like political parties and their existence does not pose a threat to the Party’s stability, however Xi has effectively ended any power the Tuanpai still held by having Li leave his position.

Having firmly established himself as China’s unquestioned leader, Xi was offered an opportunity to finally solidify his control over the Party during this Congress. The chance to reappoint members of the Politburo Standing Committee allowed him to remove any internal “dissent” (although there has not been a strong voice of dissent within the Party since Zhao Ziyang in 1989).

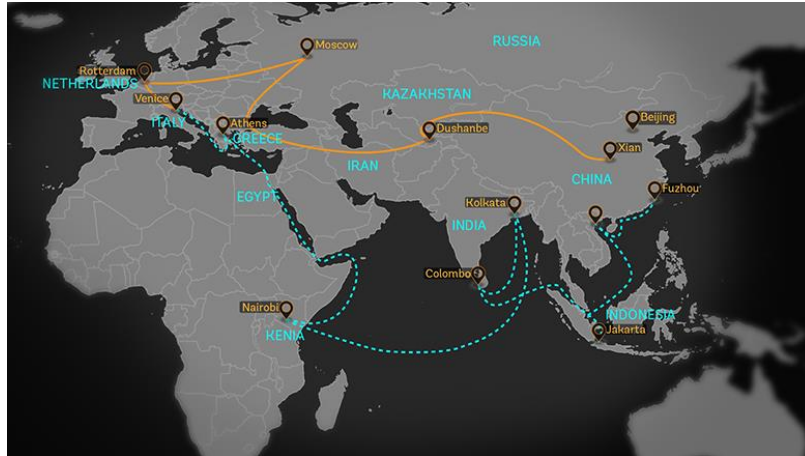
Xi’s Politburo Standing Council reflects this. The seven most powerful men in China now are all Xi loyalists, including: Li Qiang (expected to become Premier and former Party Chief of Shanghai), Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi (Beijing Party Chief), Ding Xuexiang (head of the General Office), and Li Xi (Party Chief of Guangdong).

The other major pieces of information to come out of the Congress were Xi’s economic and foreign policy. Economically, the Congress offered a chance for Xi to announce important revisions to the “Zero-Covid Policy,” which has had significant consequences for China’s economy, producing its slowest growth since the beginning of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms. This is seen as a threat to Party rule, which in the post-Mao era has based its stability upon providing continuous economic growth and a rising standard of living for its citizens. Xi did not take this opportunity. Rather he doubled down, promising even stricter and quicker responses to Covid outbreak in the country.



China's Recent GDP Growth Image Credit: Trading Economics

Foreign policy-wise, the government previously announced, “The Congress will thoroughly examine the current international and domestic situation.” Much like the rest of the outcomes from the Congress, China’s foreign policy remains behind closed doors for now. Precedence, however, indicates that Xi will push China further down the path of conflict with the United States and its allies and will continue promoting the Belt and Road Initiative. However, the actual announcement of new foreign policy will not occur until March when the Chinese Parliament meets.



The Belt and Road Initiative-- Xi's Signature Foreign Policy Piece | Credit: World Bank

The Party Congress was also marred by events which tainted the otherwise flawless execution of the Congress. Several days before the start of the Congress, a lone figure stood on top of a bridge in Beijing, unfurling a banner that read, “Food, not PCR tests. Freedom, not lockdowns. Reforms, not the Cultural Revolution. Elections not leaders,” read the second, adding: “Dignity, not lies. Citizens, not slaves.” The man, dubbed “Bridge Man,” represents a small, but notable opposition to many of the policies being pushed by Xi at the Congress. In particular, by emphasizing China’s Covid policies as the first of his targets, Bridge Man offers a look into a potentially salient issue between the Party and the Chinese people. At the same time, China’s Covid policies still maintain

widespread public support for their effectiveness thus far. And indeed, the government once again demonstrated its power vis-à-vis the Chinese populace, arresting the Bridge Man (real name Peng Lifa) several days after the protest. The Government, therefore, made it very clear - dissent will not be tolerated!

This has not stopped some Chinese students, within the country and abroad, from expressing their protest to a third Xi term. Indeed, many universities have seen protest posters put up with the Bridge Man's slogans in a surprising show of displeasure with the Party. Even still these protests are mostly localized to universities and the government has been quick to respond to their emergence on the Mainland through strict internet restrictions and increasing police and surveillance presence in Beijing and at universities throughout the country. However, doodle protests in the restrooms are becoming known as the "Toilet Revolution."

Despite its highly choreographed and scripted nature, the Congress did have one especially noteworthy event that occurred during its run. On the closing day, right as the cameras began rolling in the Chamber Room for closing speeches, former leader Hu Jintao was dramatically led out of the Chamber. The reasoning for this sudden removal remains unclear. Hu has been in increasingly poor health and China's Xinhua news agency has reported he was removed due to a health condition. Media outlets outside China have speculated that this removal could also have been a symbolic (and highly uncharacteristic) action designed to show that Xi was now the only man with any power in the Party. Like most things in China, the true cause will probably never be known.



Former Chinese President Hu Jintao looking at Xi as he is removed from the Congress Photo Credit: DW



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