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ASSESSMENT OF CHINA'S 20TH PARTY CONGRESS

by JAYADEVA RANADE

The 20th Party Congress (October 6-22, 2022) is a watershed event in China's political history and marks a new phase. It exemplified Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC) General Secretary Xi Jinping's absolute control and firm grip on the CCP. From selection of members of the Politburo and its Standing Committee to finalisation of the Work Report presented to the 20th Party Congress, all carried Xi Jinping's firm imprimatur. Xi Jinping has pushed China into becoming a one-man totalitarian state.

2. As on previous occasions a tight security blanket comprising an estimated over a million personnel was thrown over Beijing and the restive provinces. Despite the security precautions the atmosphere was marred by a 'worker' who unfurled a banner atop a bridge in Beijing's Haidian university district protesting the government's policies. Bloomberg reported that protests had also been staged in eight cities across China, but there are no corroborative reports.

3. The meticulously choreographed 20th Party Congress intended to display Xi Jinping's unchecked power was, however, disrupted on the last day by the unprecedented removal in front of the cameras of former Chinese President Hu Jintao. While it appeared that Hu Jintao might have suddenly taken ill and therefore taken away as stated by the state-owned CCTV, reports now suggest that the video showing the incident has been erased from Chinese social media and references to Hu Jintao have been deleted along with his photographs. The episode remains shrouded in mystery.

4. Each of the six other Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) members and 23 members of the Politburo (PB) – one less than the previous 25 -- is unmistakably a Xi Jinping loyalist. Xi Jinping has personally selected them and not followed any single criteria for selecting cadres. No cadre affiliated or associated with another leader, or group like the Communist Youth League (CYL), has been inducted. These top-level personnel selections mean that the PBSC will no longer take decisions on the basis of consensus. It will ensure faithful implementation of Xi Jinping's directives. This also leaves open the possibility of 69-year old Xi Jinping continuing in office for another term or even longer.

5. Interesting was that while retired senior veteran cadres were invited and those who attended were seated on the front row of the rostrum, an explanatory report on the 20th Party Congress released by Xinhua pointedly omitted any mention of Xi Jinping having consulted them on the appointments of PBSC and PB members. This is a departure from past practice.

6. Significant is that by approving the Work Report the 20th Party Congress has endorsed the policies followed by Xi Jinping thus far, including the concentration of power in his person and building of his personality cult. This means the continuance of the tough policies on ensuring the CCP's pre-eminent position, national and domestic security, 'zero-Covid', economic regulation and reform, and foreign policy.

7. Aware of the adverse international environment, Xi Jinping avoided abrasive rhetoric in his Work Report, but was defiantly uncompromising in reiterating the goals that he had set out at the two earlier Congresses in 2012 and 2017. He reiterated "we will continue to work hard and build China into a great socialist country that leads the world in terms of composite national strength and international influence by the middle of the next century".

8. For the region and China's neighbours, like Taiwan and Japan, the 20th Party Congress signals increasing tensions. Tougher language has been used for Taiwan with Xi Jinping hinting that reunification could be achieved during his tenure in office.

9. India merited special negative attention. Party Congresses do not usually name individual countries, but this time a film clip of the clashes between Indian and Chinese military personnel in Galwan was screened at the meeting for all the Delegates, special invitees and officials numbering nearly 5000 people in the Great Hall of the People. This indicates that China will not change its attitude towards India and is prepared for a long period of strained relations. Reflecting current tensions, the Work Report approved by the 20th Party Congress also included language not used by the 19th Party Congress in 2017. Discussing military training and deployment it said: "This will enable us to shape our security posture, deter and manage crises and conflicts and win local wars". For India, this means increased pressure on the borders with the high probability of further clashes.

10. A detailed assessment is appended.

(The author is former Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India and is presently President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)

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Presenting the Work Report titled 'Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in all Respects', at the opening session of the 20th Party Congress on October 16, 2022, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC) General Secretary Xi Jinping read out excerpts for over 1 hour 43 minutes instead of the entire report as at the 19th Party Congress.

2. The once in 5-year political event is meticulously choreographed to project the incumbent leader. As on previous occasions a tight security blanket, estimated to comprise over a million personnel, was thrown over Beijing and the restive provinces. Despite the security precautions the atmosphere was marred by a 'worker' who unfurled a banner atop a bridge in Beijing's Haidian university district protesting the government's policies. Bloomberg reported that protests had also been staged in eight cities across China, but there were no reports in the Chinese media.

3. The meticulously choreographed 20th Party Congress intended to display Xi Jinping's unchecked power was, however, disrupted on the last day by the unprecedented removal in front of the cameras of former Chinese President Hu Jintao. While it appeared that Hu Jintao might have suddenly taken ill and therefore taken away as stated by the state-owned CCTV, reports now suggest that the video showing the incident has been erased from Chinese social media and references to Hu Jintao have been deleted along with his photographs. The episode remains shrouded in mystery.

4. The 20th Party Congress should have been attended by 2,296 delegates and 83 specially invited delegates, totalling 2,379 people, but 39 people had asked for leave due to work or illness. Resultantly there were 2,340 actual delegates and specially-invited delegates.

5. Interesting was that while retired senior veteran cadres were invited and those who attended were seated on the front row of the rostrum in the Great Hall of the People, an explanatory report on the 20th Party Congress released this time by Xinhua pointedly omitted any mention of Xi Jinping having consulted them on the appointments of Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) and Politburo (PB) members.

6. Among the veteran cadres seated on the front row of the rostrum were former Chinese President Hu Jintao (seated to the left and next to Xi Jinping), Li Ruihuan, Wen Jiabao, Jia Qinglin, Zhang Dejiang, Yu Zhengsheng, Song Ping, Li Lanqing, Zeng Qinghong, Wu Guanzheng, Li Changchun, He Guoqiang, Liu Yunshan, Zhang Gaoli (who was accused in November 2021 by Chinese Tennis star Peng Shuan of sexually molesting her, but later withdrew the charge and acknowledged that they had been having an affair for many years),

You Quan and Zhang Qingli (a former Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) who called the XIVth Dalai Lama a “wolf in sheep’s clothing and the heart of a beast”). He has been dropped from the 20th CCP CC). Former Chinese President Jiang Zemin did not attend.

7. The list of new members of the PBSC, PB and Central Committee (CC) were disclosed only on the final day of the Congress on October 22. The new PBSC includes: Xi Jinping, Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang and Li Xi. Each of the six other Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) members and 24 members of the Politburo (PB) – one less than previously -- is a Xi Jinping loyalist. No cadre affiliated to another leader, including retired veteran cadre, or group like the Communist Youth League (CYL) has been inducted. Equally importantly, they all owe their positions to him – a Xinhua release illustrated Xi Jinping’s role at each stage of the selection process -- as he has not followed any single criteria for selecting cadres. Xi Jinping has neither observed the convention of age limits for cadres in the PBSC or PB as borne out by the retention of 72-year old General Zhang Youxia on the Politburo.

8. Significantly, he has also demoted cadres. The ouster of 59-year old Hu Chunhua from the Politburo and retention only as a member of the Central Committee (CC) is a prominent example. So also is the removal from the Politburo of 66-year old Chen Quanguo, former Party Secretary of Xinjiang and earlier Tibet, who is now not even a member of the Central Committee. Chen Quanguo was handpicked by Xi Jinping for appointment as TAR Party Secretary and later promoted to the Politburo and sent to Xinjiang. These are clear signals to senior cadres that they can be removed from their positions! Apparently to drive the point home, an official Xinhua release of October 24 asserted that "Party and national leadership positions are not 'iron chairs'!" These top-level personnel selections also mean that the decisions of the PBSC will no longer be on the basis of consensus. It will ensure faithful implementation of Xi Jinping’s directives.

9. The new 20th CC has 138 new members out of 204 members, or 67.6%, suggesting that Xi Jinping has packed it with loyalists. The 19th CC had 85 new members out of 205 full members – or 41.5%. The 20th CC has 11 female members, up one compared to the 19th CC, and only 9 from the Ethnic Minorities-- a sharp drop from the 15 in the 19th CC. In the new 20th CC among the 43 People’s Liberation Army (PLA) members, 13 are PLA Lt. Generals and the remaining 30 are PLA Generals. The service-wise distribution of members is: PLA Air Force (5); PLA Navy (10), People’s Armed Police (3), PLA Army (23), and PLA Rocket Force (2). Of the Alternate Members of the CC, 4 have retained their positions, 25 have been elevated as Full Members of the CC and 114 are newly appointed CC Members. There are 22 women and 20 representatives of ethnic minorities.

10. The 72-page, 33,273 (Chinese)-character Report presented this time to the 20th Party Congress was slightly longer than the Report (31,750 Chinese-characters) that Xi Jinping presented at the 19th Party Congress in 2017. This Work Report has 15 sections compared to the 13 in the Report for the 19th Congress. Three are new, namely: Section 5 titled 'Invigorating China through Science and Education and Developing a Strong Workforce for the Modernization Drive' on Science, education and innovation; Section 7 on legal reform and titled 'Exercising Law-Based Governance on All Fronts and Advancing the Rule of Law in China'; and Section 11 on National Security titled 'Modernizing China's National Security

System and Capacity and Safeguarding National Security and Social Stability'. There was a separate section on National Defence.

11. Reasserting the CCP's objective, Xi Jinping said "we will continue to work hard and build China into a great socialist country that leads the world in terms of composite national strength and international influence by the middle of the next century". It announced no policy changes. Instead, Xi Jinping appeared to double down on certain issues like arresting the erosion in the Party's image and credibility -- unusually blunt references to which he made in the Work Report -- and rectifying the Party, persisting with the 'zero-Covid' policy, further strengthening the national security apparatus, science and technology, achieving national rejuvenation and reunification of the country, and modernising and strengthening the army to "win local wars". While Xi Jinping omitted the term "local wars" from the excerpts that he read out, "local wars" is mentioned in the Work Report.

12. National security, the CCP, political ideology and political reliability, science and technology and innovation were among the predominant themes in the Work Report presented to the 20th Party Congress. In fact, the Work Report listed "upholding the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and socialism with Chinese characteristics" as the first among the "essential requirements" of modernisation. These illustrate the leadership's priorities and are areas where China is investing huge sums of money and manpower. The importance of Science and Innovation as thrust areas has clearly been elevated in the wake of the restrictions imposed by the U.S. on the sale of hi-tech components, microprocessors etc.

13. The Work Report acknowledged the major challenges China faces and efforts by unnamed foreign powers to destabilise China and topple the CCP. Unlike at the 19th Party Congress where Xi Jinping spoke of the "window of opportunity", in this report he was more cautious and said "Both China and the world are in the midst of profound and complex changes. China is still in an important period of strategic opportunity for development; the prospects are bright but the challenges are severe. All comrades must aim high and look far, be alert to dangers even in times of calm, have the courage to pursue reform and break new ground, and never become hardened". This was emphasised in the areas of focus identified for the next five years.

14. Despite the serious problems in the economy, it didn't get priority in the Report. The number of references to the economy dropped from 70 in the Report of 2017 to 60 in this Report. Similarly, economic reforms was mentioned only 48 times in contrast to the 68 times in 2017. The issues of unemployment, slowing economy and economic reforms etc found little space and no new economic initiatives were announced. The solitary mention of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) -- Chinese investment in which has dropped by nearly 50 per cent in the past couple of years -- was, however, indicative of the difficult economic conditions. There were also only two brief mentions of "common prosperity". The Report did, though, talk of more equitable distribution of incomes and China's official media discussed it at length during and immediately after the Congress indicating that it will be pursued. It addressed the urban-rural development and income imbalances suggesting acknowledgement of the wide gaps in development and income distribution between urban and rural areas.

15. At the same time, implying that efforts to enhance Party control will continue, the Report asserted that the Party will build its presence in the economic enterprises including mixed enterprises. The market reacted immediately to the Report. On October 24, the Hongkong China Index, which includes the top 50 Chinese companies, dropped 6 percent on heavy volume. Alibaba, Tencent and Meituan each dropped over 10 per cent and overseas investors sold a record US\$ 2.5 billion worth Mainland shares via the Shanghai-Hongkong Stock Connect. Wealthy Chinese are reportedly trying to move almost US\$40 billion out of China.

16. Aware of the adverse international environment, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC) General Secretary Xi Jinping avoided abrasive rhetoric in his Work Report, but was defiantly uncompromising in reiterating the goals that he had set out at the two intervening Congresses in 2012 and 2017. He exuded confidence in his assertions -- directed mainly at the domestic audience -- to make China a major world power. Xi Jinping declared that "scientific socialism" and "Chinese wisdom" enabled China to offer a "new choice for humanity"!

17. The CCP was prominent in the Work Report. It figured the most with 261 mentions as compared to 331 times in the 2017 Report. Cognizant of the challenges confronting China, Xi Jinping doubled down on issues like arresting the erosion in the Party's image and credibility -- unusually blunt references to which he made in the Work Report -- and 'rectifying' the Party. There was emphasis on ensuring that Party members "follow the Central Committee in terms of political stance, orientation, principles, and path and that the Party's solidarity and unity are maintained". It said the Party will strengthen centralisation and its leadership and "enforce strict political discipline and rules" and make "full use of criticism and self-criticism". He devoted considerable space to the spread of Marxist ideology, the Party and raising the ideological standards of Party members. Keeping them corruption-free was accorded priority. He indicated that the stringent standards set for Party members, and especially high ranking cadres and leadership teams and their heads, would be scrupulously enforced and stipulated that "political commitment is the primary criterion for selection" of cadres and officials. He made it clear that efforts to promote the CCP and consolidate its premier position will continue.

18. National security dominated the report with Xi Jinping referring to it 91 times in this Report in contrast to the 42 mentions in 2017. Highlighting its importance it declared that "National security is the bedrock of national rejuvenation". The Report said steps are being taken to coordinate "external and internal security, homeland and public security, traditional and non-traditional security" and that popular support for national security and social stability will be strengthened. Though not mentioned by name, the implication that the US was the main threat was explicit. Xi Jinping referred to the "external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade and exert maximum pressure on China" and said "external attempts to suppress and contain China may escalate at any time". He promised to "crack down hard on infiltration, sabotage, subversion and separatist activities by hostile forces". Xi Jinping declared China's "firm determination to never yield to coercive power". The regular references by Chinese officials and in the official Mainland media over the past few years to attempts by "hostile" foreign powers to instigate "colour revolutions" and holding

of the annual National Security Week have been pointing to the CCP's and Chinese leadership's concerns about national security.

19. Official Chinese media reports have independently disclosed that over the past couple of years there has been a three-fold increase in the number of public security personnel with provinces recruiting large numbers. China spent approximately 1.38 trillion yuan on public security in 2018, a threefold increase in the past decade. The public security expenditure includes state security, police, domestic surveillance, armed civil militia, and other measures to deal with public disturbances. Since 2010, it has surpassed the country's military spending. It exceeded military spending by approximately 200 million yuan in 2018. Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Xinjiang were the top three provinces in terms of public security spending.

20. Two appointments specifically underscore the focus on security. Chen Weiming, the Minister of State Security (MoSS), was elevated to the Politburo. He is likely to be appointed Secretary of the Political and Legal Affairs Commission (PLAC), China's apex security body. The other was the appointment just prior to the 20th Party Congress of Wang Xiaohong as Minister of Public Security. While he continues as a CC member, he has also been appointed member of the 5-member CCP CC Secretariat, a powerful body that oversees the functioning of the CC and its organisations and reports directly to Xi Jinping. The only other member of the Secretariat who is not in the Politburo is Liu Jinguo, who also has a strong background in Public Security and was till recently in the CCP's top anti-corruption watchdog body, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC).

21. Xi Jinping has also linked security with development. Apprehensions about the US and West's attempts to contain China -- as also indication that China is preparing for a long period of strained ties with the U.S and West -- surfaced again later in the report when Xi Jinping announced that "mechanisms for countering foreign sanctions, interference and long-arm jurisdiction will be strengthened". Stating that "strategic opportunities, risks and challenges are concurrent and uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising", Xi Jinping cautioned cadres that "various "black swan" and "gray rhino" events may occur at any time" and "We must therefore be more mindful of potential dangers, be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios, and be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms." But he also sought to dispel speculation that China was closing itself to the world by announcing that China is "committed to its fundamental policy of opening to the outside world" and will "contribute its share to building an open global economy.

22. As evident from inclusion of the new section titled 'Invigorating China through Science and Education and Developing a Strong Workforce for the Modernization Drive', Science, Technology and Innovation are thrust areas. The Report said "Innovation will remain at the heart of China's modernisation drive" and that education and strength in strategic science and technology will be boosted. Alluding to the restrictions imposed by the U.S. on the sale of hi-tech components, microprocessors etc., it said "to meet China's strategic needs, we will concentrate resources on original and pioneering scientific and technological research to achieve breakthroughs in core technologies in key fields". On October 7, the U.S. announced a ban not only on the sale of chips to China but also the advanced equipment needed to make them and "knowledge" from any U.S. citizens, residents or green card

holders, effectively banning them from working for Chinese chipmakers. On the same day it added 30 Chinese companies to a list of “unverified” firms its officials had been unable to inspect.

23. The Report mentioned no policy changes. In apparent disregard of extant resentment, Xi Jinping has persisted with the 'zero-Covid' policy.

24. The section elaborating the ‘Centenary goal of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and further modernising National Defence and the Military’ is important. It reiterates the goal of accelerating the elevation of the PLA to world-class standards “through mechanisation, informatisation and application of smart technologies” by its centenary in 2027. It promises to “carry out operations” and boost combat preparedness. Of import is disclosure of the decision to establish “a strong system of strategic deterrence, increase the proportion of new-domain forces with new combat capabilities”. This confirms reports that China is increasing its nuclear arsenal and also that it intends to enlarge the PLA Strategic Support Force and PLA Rocket Force and enhance their combat capabilities. Hinting that the PLA is being prepared for multiple roles, Xi Jinping said the PLA will be “flexible” in its operations.

25. Of special significance to the region and its neighbours are Xi Jinping’s observations on Taiwan and the military. Language on containing Taiwan's independence was inserted and stronger phrases used to reaffirm "two countries, one system". Striking an uncompromising stance on Taiwan and “realising China’s complete reunification”, Xi Jinping asserted that “We will implement our Party’s overall policy for resolving the Taiwan question in the new era”. He added “complete reunification of our country must be realised and it can, without doubt, be realised.” This assertion, hinting at efforts to achieve it during Xi Jinping’s term in office, was greeted with resounding applause by the Delegates. Earlier, Xi Jinping had said that while China will strive for peaceful reunification “we will never promise to renounce the use of force”.

26. India merited special negative attention. In the backdrop of China’s plans for a massive border defence infrastructure build-up in Tibet and enhanced naval capability, the reference to winning local wars is pertinent. It has immediate implications for India. Party Congresses do not usually name individual countries, but this time a film clip of the clashes between Indian and Chinese military personnel in Galwan was screened at the meeting for all the Delegates, special invitees and officials numbering nearly 5,000 in the Great Hall of the People. This indicates that China will not change its attitude towards India and is prepared for a long period of strained relations. Reflecting current tensions, the Work Report approved by the 20th Party Congress also included language not used by the 19th Party Congress in 2017. Discussing military training and deployment it said: “This will enable us to shape our security posture, deter and manage crises and conflicts and win local wars”. For India, this means fresh deployments and increased pressure on the borders with the high probability of further clashes.

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