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XI JINPING AND THE PORTENDS FOR HIS THIRD TERM

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The recent rumour that Xi Jinping had been placed under house arrest, prompted by wishful thinking rather than fact, nonetheless confirmed that Xi Jinping is now China's central figure nearly as much as Mao and Deng Xiaoping once were!

Xi's retaining his positions at the helm of affairs after China's 20th Party Congress this October seems a foregone conclusion. He will then become the first Chinese leader since Mao and Deng to lead the country into a second decade. His acolytes had said, soon after he began his first term in November 2012, that 'China under Xi Jinping has embarked on a third new 30-year era like those of Mao and Deng Xiaoping before him'!

Xi Jinping is ambitious, bold and confident in the exercise of power, qualities he would have imbibed as one born into the privileged elite of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As the son of Qi Xin and General Xi Zhongxun, one of Mao's trusted lieutenants at the height of his power when Xi was born in 1953, Xi Jinping studied in the special school for children of the CCP elite. He and his co-students, and peers in his social circles, were instilled with the idea that they had a historical destiny to fulfil and carry the torch for restoring China to its 'old' glory. Schools across China teach students that "recovery" of the territories depicted as Chinese territories in a 1840-1919 map is a sacred duty. This mindset has been inculcated not only in Xi Jinping, but other 'princelings' and 'Red Descendants', or children of CCP cadres.

Xi also saw the dark side of the CCP's power politics. His father was 'purged' from the CCP and sent to Henan province in 1963 when he was 10 years old, and in May 1966, the Cultural Revolution cut short his secondary education. 'Red Guards' ransacked the Xi family home and Xi's elder sister, Xi Heping, committed suicide from the pressure. His mother was humiliated and forced to publicly denounce his father when he was paraded before crowds as an enemy of the revolution. The year following his father's arrest in 1968, Xi was sent to work in Liangjiahe Village, Shaanxi.

Despite the misfortunes and suffering that he and his family witnessed in his early years, Xi did not go abroad or opt to join State-owned Enterprises (SoEs) like the children of other senior CCP cadres. Instead, he took the risky decision of joining the CCP at a time he had no 'protector' or patron till Deng Xiaoping returned to power in 1979. The experience undoubtedly toughened him mentally and reinforced his ideological commitment. Subsequently, however, his family connections did facilitate his rise in the CCP as evident from

the letter written in the 1980s by his mother Qi Xin, to the Party Secretary of Hebei urging him to promote her son to the provincial party standing committee. The Party Secretary declined and also, against convention, made public the request but was over-ruled!

Within days of taking charge in November 2012, and without a trace of self-doubt because of his pedigree, Xi took the bold step of simultaneously 'rectifying' the Party, Army and government bureaucracy and placing academia – primary schools to universities – into an ideological strait-jacket. He commenced a thorough 'rectification' of the Party, unleashed a relentless anti-corruption campaign intended to also weed out opposition, and undertook the reorganisation and restructuring of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The last had been pending since the time of his predecessor Hu Jintao, because he hadn't been able to muster adequate support. His fervent commitment to the CCP ideology and sense of destiny were evident. It is very unusual for any leader to simultaneously shake all pillars of a state as Xi did. Inside two years over 40,000 officers of the PLA including 150 above the rank of Major General, and 175 cadres equivalent to and above central Vice Ministers, were dismissed and jailed on various charges of corruption. The cornerstone of Xi's consecutive political re-education campaigns in the Party and PLA has been to ensure the pre-eminence of Party ideology, placement of personnel loyal to him and ensure that the PLA is "absolutely obedient" to the CCP and him. In the process he has made China an even more totalitarian state.

Xi's appointment to China's three top posts at the 18th Party Congress in October 2012 clearly showed that he had the backing and support of the Party, which had mandated him to ensure the spread and supremacy of Party ideology and the Party's pre-eminent position. The Party apparatchiks, current and retired Party members and their families, all of whom are favoured with numerous perquisites and privileges constitute a dependable loyal base for the CCP. They have a personal stake in continuance of the CCP's leadership. They will support Xi and he will depend on them, but if they apprehend that the Party or its leadership is threatened, they could well oust him from the leadership to save the Party. At the same time, Xi's approval by the upcoming 20th Party Congress for a third term will mean that the CCP has endorsed his domestic and foreign policies.

As Xi commences his third 5-year term in October 2022, he will also have to make good on some of the promises and ambitions he has declared. He is almost certain to incrementally expand the scope of the stringent domestic security laws and continue with the unrelenting anti-corruption campaign. He has already, in fact, linked national development with national security through the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI). But the slowing economy which some months ago necessitated reducing the wages of government employees by 30 percent, burgeoning unemployment, rising living costs, 'zero Covid' policy and the surge in anti-China sentiment globally – all of which have already made people openly resentful – are likely to dog him through his third tenure.

Resentment continues to simmer among large sections of the populace, especially among China's powerful class of "princelings", intellectuals and students and the private business entrepreneurial class which accounts for 80 percent of the country's employment. These have the potential to severely impact Xi's efforts. If unchecked, they could derail national ambitions

and even threaten to erode the CCP's legitimacy which, in turn, would pile inner-Party pressure on Xi to moderate his policies or step down.

As Xi pushes ahead with his foreign policy agenda, he will confront major obstacles in the Indo-Pacific region with opposition from countries like India, Japan, Vietnam and Australia who will not readily acquiesce to China becoming the regional overlord. Tension between the US and China over Taiwan, in the South China Sea and the war in Ukraine is already high. CCP members are apprehensive that any escalation of tension could see the imposition of US sanctions against China, which will seriously affect China's economy and, more importantly, personally impact the approximately 40 million senior CCP cadres and their families.

Impacting the world are Xi's calls for "rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation" and to make "China a major power with pioneering global influence" along with creating a "community of common destiny". These are incorporated in the Constitution. Referred to as the 'Two Centenary' goals, the first entails redrawing China's borders as it "recovers" territories that it claims were taken by the imposition of "unequal treaties by hostile foreign powers". This directly affects China's neighbours. For India it means China will persist with its claims over Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh and other pockets of territories on the stretch of the border between them. Border tensions and clashes between both the armed forces are a distinct possibility in the years ahead. There will be similar situations with Japan, Vietnam and Taiwan. The second affirms Xi's goal of fashioning a new global world order and surpassing the United States. In addition to generating wider international opposition, this has the potential for a clash between the two in the near term. If Xi succeeds he will have positioned China as the pre-eminent world power.

It will not be easy for Xi to achieve these objectives, certainly within the time frame he has set. Barring issues of health, however, Xi's qualities of character, personality and mental make-up suggest he will make a determined bid. Having secured the Party's endorsement for his policies, Xi will not easily backtrack on any of the policies – whether economic, security or China's aggressive external posture. Disregarding the slowing economy and fears of China's business entrepreneurs, Xi has continued to tighten regulations on China's Fintech and Real Estate sectors, and called for "common prosperity". He has portrayed discontent, protests etc. as threatening social order and stability and indicative of US efforts to topple the CCP through "colour revolutions". There will be no easing in the aggressiveness of his foreign policy as that would weaken the self-perception of China as a 'strong' nation. With Xi at the helm, the next five-odd years will be fraught and tense and the outcome will be crucial for the region and the world!

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