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'XI JINPING PREPARES TO LEAD CHINA INTO NEW THIRTY YEAR ERA'

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Last week there was a major, though anticipated, development in China's internal politics with the announcement that term limits on the posts of China's President and Vice President would be abolished. Removing the limitation on these tenures establishes Xi Jinping's pre-eminent stature and allows him to continue interminably subject to his health. It removes the possibility of any perceived depletion of authority in case he is compelled to step down as President on the completion of two terms in 2023. In reality, Xi Jinping and the 'princelings' or 'Red Descendants' have effected a coup to achieve the dreams of their forebears and restore China to what they perceive is its former greatness. The decision potentially has immense implications and long-term repercussions.

On February 25, 2018 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Central Committee (CC) convened a special plenary session to recommend an amendment to the constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC). A 4457-character communiqué issued after the plenum proposed abolition of the two term – 10 year – limit on the tenures of China's President and Vice President. The amendments will be incorporated into the PRC Constitution when the 2980 newly elected Deputies of the National People's Congress (NPC) – China's version of a parliament – meet in Beijing for its first session on March 5, 2018.

This will be the first amendment to China's constitution in 14 years. Another ten amendments of varying importance will also be deliberated, with at least two further

adding to Xi Jinping's authority. One will establish the State Supervisory Commission, a body that will exercise authority over even the Party's powerful Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC). Another amendment to the constitution, but unlike others, significantly asserts, "CCP leadership is the most substantive feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics". The amendment amplifies the thrust of Xi Jinping's report to the 19th Party Congress -- that the Party will pervade every sphere of endeavour of the state -- and in doing so effectively dispenses with the, albeit cosmetic superficial, separation of the Party and state that Deng Xiaoping sought to usher in.

The time limit on tenures of China's President and Vice President were brought in by Deng Xiaoping in 1982, who was determined to guard against re-emergence of a personality cult like that of Mao Zedong. Deng Xiaoping was also keen that there is no repetition of the one-man authoritarian rule that China witnessed during Mao's almost 30-year regime and during which many Party cadres and members had suffered. Many senior cadres including Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun had personally suffered and been purged for questioning Mao's judgement or because Mao felt they were not complying with his instructions. By discarding these provisions, Xi Jinping has effectively closed the door on Deng Xiaoping's era.

Xi Jinping, who has used nationalism and ideology to promote political stability and ensure the Party's monopoly on power, began to quickly concentrate greater power soon after his appointment to China's three top posts of CCP CC General Secretary, Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and President of China. By September 2017, Xi Jinping was overseeing crucial aspects of the state and exercised direct control over the security apparatus, military, cyber security and the economy. He holds fifteen formal positions, more than any CCP leader including Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping! He took care to simultaneously build his credentials as a Chinese communist ideologue and in June 2014 the CCP theoretical fortnightly journal 'Qiu Shi' (Seeking Truth) described Xi Jinping as "one of China's greatest communist leaders". The 19th

Party Congress incorporated 'Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics in the New Era' into the Party Constitution and, after the first Politburo meeting a couple of days later, the term *lingxiu* (respected leader) is being used for Xi Jinping. The term *lingxiu* was last used for Mao. Xi Jinping has used the media effectively too and is regularly the lead news item in the People's Daily and China Central Television (CCTV). In contrast to his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao who received media coverage 3000 and 2000 times a year respectively, there are more than 5000 news items on Xi Jinping each year!

Quite aside from the symbolic value of the amendment, interesting is that the post of China's President is the least important of Xi Jinping's three posts and that of the PRC Vice President even less so with neither exercising any substantive power. Real power vests in the post of General Secretary of the CCP CC, which has no formal fixed tenure. Since the 17th Party Congress in 2007, however, the CCP has observed an informal rule that no individual shall hold the post of CCP CC General Secretary for more than two terms of five years each. The next most important post in China, that of Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) also has no such limitation. In fact, since 1987 the Chairman of the CMC need not be the CCP CC General Secretary or a member of the Politburo or even a member of the CC. Jiang Zemin, for instance, continued as Chairman of the CMC for one and a half years after Hu Jintao had taken over as CCP CC General Secretary.

On the surface, Xi Jinping's move to abolish term limits on China's President and Vice President do not appear to materially affect him except that he would have to give up the post of President in case he continues beyond his second term. Speculation is rife in Beijing that the amendment paves the way for the appointment of Wang Qishan, till recently Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member and Xi Jinping's trusted friend and lieutenant, as Vice President of China. Wang Qishan could possibly concurrently be appointed Chairman of the powerful State Supervisory Commission that will be formally

established by the upcoming NPC session, allowing him to continue the work he began while chairing the Party's CDIC, but from a more powerful vantage perch. This move nonetheless implies that the 'informal' limit on the term for a General Secretary of the CCP CC can easily be dispensed with. Similarly, observance of the 'informal' rule that Party cadres aged 68 years or more are ineligible for entry to the Politburo (PB) or PBSC is now at risk. The amendments could open the doors for Xi Jinping promoting his followers and loyalists to higher Party bodies as well retaining loyal cadres, like 67-year old PBSC member Li Zhanshu and 66-year old Harvard-trained economist Liu He, in the PB and PBSC regardless of age.

While quite predictably the PLA expressed "resolute support" to the amendments on February 27, there are hints of opposition to the lifting of limits on the terms of the President and Vice President.

The sequence of meetings to deliberate and approve the decision is an indication. On January 18–19, 2018 the 2nd Plenum Communiqué announced a constitutional amendment along with a summary in the communiqué but did not mention the removal of term limits. According to a Reuters report there were differing views and no consensus at this Plenum attended by 204 CC members; the date inscribed at the bottom of the Constitutional Amendment Draft published on February 26 is "signed" by the Central Committee on January 26 -- however there is no record of a Central Committee Plenum on January 26 or of a Politburo meeting; a Politburo meeting was held on January 30; the NPC Standing Committee which met on February 22-23 is said to have decided on the submission of proposals to a full NPC; on February 24 there was a PB meeting and 'study session' on Constitutional matters; on February 25 the text of the Constitutional Amendment (and announcement on term limit) dated January 26 and signed "Central Committee" was published; and a 3rd CC Plenum was held on February 26 – 27.

There is an important indication of the nervousness in the central Party leadership on

this issue. A Reuters report that filtered out of Hong Kong on February 28 stated that Xinhua has been blamed by the leadership for releasing a single message in English titled "CPC proposes change on Chinese president's term in Constitution" at 3:55 pm on February 25. The Chinese version was released two hours later with the full text from the CCP CC. No single report for the term limits in Chinese was released. According to the report, this was considered as severe political misconduct and the relevant editors were dismissed and the leader of Xinhua was required to write a self-criticism.

Public articulation of anger on February 25 flooded Wechat, Weibo and Sina – which together account for hundreds of millions of users – with criticism, satire and satirical cartoons of Xi Jinping. The same day the Party's Central Propaganda Department ordered the blocking of at least 28 words and phrases deemed critical of either Xi Jinping or the decision. 66-year old Li Datong, a former editor of the state-run China Youth Daily, issued a statement addressed to Beijing's 55 Deputies to the NPC on WeChat on February 25, asking them to oppose the bill. Asserting that 'he is old and has nothing to fear', Li Datong said lifting term limits would "sow the seeds of chaos and that if there are no term limits on a country's highest leader, then we are returning to an imperial regime. My generation has lived through Mao. That era is over. How can we possibly go back to it?" Separately, Wang Ying, a businesswoman who has advocated government reforms, on WeChat described the Communist Party's proposal as "an outright betrayal" and "against the tides." She said, "I know that you (the government) will dare to do anything and one ordinary person's voice is certainly useless. But I am a Chinese citizen, and I don't plan on leaving. This is my motherland too!" The state-run Global Times on February 25 indirectly acknowledged the opposition when it said "There has been a related statement in the preamble to the Constitution, but this has been challenged by some who are supported and instigated by overseas forces. In this sense, stressing the CPC leadership in the Constitutional amendment proposal was essential."

Of interest too is the appearance since November 2017 in commentaries in the PLA

Daily and military media of new phraseology emphasising the need to “protect” Xi Jinping as the core of the leadership. The phrases include: “we must ... keep a close watch on our awareness and resolutely safeguard Chairman Xi's core position in the Party Central Committee and the whole party”; “Chairman Xi as the core of the party Central Committee, ... and the whole army sincerely support and resolutely safeguard it ...”; “safeguarding Chairman Xi's position at the core of the Party Central Committee”; and “ensure that the whole army is absolutely loyal, absolutely pure and absolutely reliable. It resolutely listens to the Chairman's command, ... and makes President Xi reassured.” This emphasis on ‘protecting’ and ‘safeguarding’ Xi Jinping’s position is new and worth note. It coincides with a usually informed but unconfirmed report of an attempt on Xi Jinping’s life towards the end of last year.

The amendments solidify Xi Jinping’s position as China’s pre-eminent leader and will have an impact on China’s domestic policies and relations with other countries. There will now be no restraints domestically on Xi Jinping pursuing his goals. However, having taken charge of economic policy, Xi Jinping will be responsible for any slowdown in growth and the people’s living standards not keeping pace with their aspirations. In the nearer term, China’s effort to establish sovereignty over the South China Sea and effect reunification with Taiwan will be redoubled. China will pursue Xi Jinping’s flagship projects of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) and ‘China Dream’ - both incorporated in the Party Constitution – along with his ambition of achieving the ‘rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation’ with greater vigour. There will be increased pressure on countries to acquiesce to the BRI. The time-table spelt out in Xi Jinping’s report to the 19th Congress, of making China a strong developed nation having “pioneering global influence” by 2050, will now acquire increased emphasis. China can be expected to adopt a tougher stance and negotiate harder to realize the ‘China Dream’ by 2021. There is little prospect of any softening in China’s stance on issues of sovereignty and territory. It is anticipated that China will be even more assertive now that Xi Jinping is its sole leader.

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