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THE XI JINPING ADMINISTRATION IN ITS THIRD TERM: WHAT KIND OF DIPLOMACY SHOULD JAPAN PURSUE TOWARD CHINA?

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- Behind Xi Jinping's third term as a strong leader is the Communist Party leaders' strong sense of crisis about internal and external circumstances and the urgency of building a governing system based on law and discipline.
- If Japan closes its diplomatic window by dismissing China as a "dictatorship" and joins in the dichotomization of the world, Japan's security and national interests will be undermined.
- Japan needs to make diplomatic efforts to build multidimensional and multilayered international relations, including military security, economic security, and even "life" security, transcending differences in political regimes and values, and to involve China in such relations.

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The Xi Jinping Administration in Its Third Term

With the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (hereinafter, “20th Party Congress”) held in October 2022, the Xi Jinping administration entered its third term, breaking with the recent practice of general secretaries serving two terms up to 10 years. This fact shows that Xi, who was not necessarily a renowned leader 10 years ago, has become a “strong leader”.

Reasons for the Emergence of a “Strong Leader”

Why and how was the “strong leader” Xi Jinping created? In the author's view, behind the emergence of a strong leader was a common sense of crisis among Party leaders with regard to internal and external conditions. When Xi took office in 2012, Party leaders shared the understanding that the United States, which had incited the color revolutions, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong, was now targeting mainland China and was planning to overthrow its one-party regime through intellectual networks, NGOs, and Christian churches. Domestically, they were also very concerned that the corruption that had pervaded the Party, government, and military from the local level to the center not only hindered market reforms but also had led to the threat of a Party split, as shown by the scandals of Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang. If this situation continues, China may be plunged into an economic crisis and even into political turmoil. To overcome this critical situation and build a robust government and markets based on law and discipline, a leader with strong power and authority is required, and time is also needed to carry out this difficult task in vast and populous China. The common understanding among Party leaders was probably something along these lines.

Building a “Robust” Governing System with a “Strong Leader”

During the past decade, attempts to build a “robust” governing system have been put into practice by the Xi administration. First, the administration tightened the control of thought and speech, and placed the activities of liberal intellectuals and NGOs as well as information on the Internet under strict surveillance. It also launched a nationwide movement praising Xi Jinping, gave Xi the core position on the Party Central Committee and in the Party as a whole, and included the phrase “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” in the Party constitution and the national constitution. In addition, it has created a system in which Xi supervises policies in all areas by enhancing the Party's central organs, such as the committees and the

leading groups that substantively decide important national policies, and by placing Xi at the head of these organizations.


With power and authority in his hands, Xi has used the Party's Discipline Inspection Commission to conduct an exhaustive anti-corruption campaign targeting Party, government, and military organizations from the central to the local level, as well as state-owned enterprises, media, and universities. Furthermore, under the banner of "rule by law," Xi has employed the Party's Political and Legal Affairs Commission to establish a governing structure for "rule by law" from the center to localities and even down to the residential district level. Xi's goal seems to be to enhance a top-down vertical chain of command by building disciplined Party organizations loyal to the Party Central Committee in every corner of society.

Given the above series of initiatives over the past 10 years, how should we characterize the Xi administration, which has now entered its third term? On the one hand, it is easy to portray Xi Jinping as a dictator who privatizes power. This trend is particularly apparent in his arbitrary way of conducting personnel affairs. Following the 20th Party Congress and the First Session of the 14th National People's Congress, key positions in the Party and state apparatus have mostly been monopolized by Xi's longtime aides, and the leaders who did not belong to Xi's personal circle were blatantly eliminated. On the other hand, it is possible to portray Xi Jinping as a virtuous man who has been forced to seize power and authority for the common good of protecting China from internal and external "enemies," eradicating corruption, and creating a government and markets based on law and discipline. We cannot judge which of these interpretations is correct at this point. For the Xi administration, the only way to prove that the latter is correct is to achieve economic stability and development and improve people's welfare through its future endeavors.

Japan should build a pluralistic and multilayered international environment with China, overcoming differences in regimes and values

In Japan, there is a widespread tendency to dismiss China as a dictatorship without paying attention to its internal logic. Especially since the US-China confrontation and Russia's invasion of Ukraine began, there has been a noticeable trend among Japanese lawmakers and media to use assertive words to fully engage in the war of discourse created by the US targeting Russia and China. Autonomous diplomacy featuring "panoramic views" disappeared with the resignation and death of former Prime Minister Abe.

Of course, utilizing the position of being a US ally for Japan's security and development has been important in the past and present, and efforts should be made to continue this approach. However, if war should break out between China and the US, Japan, a neighbor of China's, would become the front line of the war. Japan should be mindful of this risk and work hard to halt the move toward global dichotomization, which would narrow Japan's diplomatic options and jeopardize its national security. Efforts to build a pluralistic and multilayered international environment with China are possible on many fronts. For example, one idea would be to build a "life security" partnership between Japan and China that relates to the health and livelihood of the people of both countries by promoting personnel exchange and cooperation in areas such as medical and nursing care. It is important to build a multidimensional security framework that includes not only military and economic security, but also "life" security, and to make it function as a device to deter war.

Originally, the strength of Japan's diplomacy lay in its flexibility to achieve coexistence and harmony with various political regimes based on a diversity of values. Japan should demonstrate this strength in its diplomacy toward China. 

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