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The 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and Prospects for 2023

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The new leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established in October 2022, following the 20th Congress of the CCP and the subsequent First Plenary Session of the Central Committee. As expected, Xi Jinping remained General Secretary and began his third term. Former General Secretary Hu Jintao's abrupt departure in the middle of the Party Congress' closing ceremony attracted a lot of attention, and Xi's overwhelming victory in personnel appointments surprised observers. What policies Xi Jinping will formulate in his third term, particularly his foreign policy and its impact on the security environment in East Asia, is a matter of great interest to neighbouring countries. In addition, the sudden de facto abandonment of the highly restrictive zero-Covid policy, which had been in place for nearly three years, has led to an explosion of infections across the country.

This article summarises the characteristics of the new leadership inaugurated following the Party Congress and analyses its impact on the international security environment in East Asia and the background to the sudden shift away from the zero-Covid policy, with a view to their likely repercussions for 2023.

Xi Jinping's efforts to strengthen his authority still have some way to go

Xi Jinping's predecessor as general secretary, Hu Jintao, took office in 2002 and stepped down in 2012. Xi joined the standing committee of the Politburo in 2007 and was widely recognised as the next general secretary. The consensus among observers was that this periodic generational change of leadership had been consolidated during the Hu Jintao years and that Chinese politics had become institutionalised. Xi Jinping's retention as general secretary completely overturned that perception.

After ten years of the Xi Jinping administration, there was already a widespread view that a concentration of power was underway and that the collective leadership system was largely in retreat. With Xi Jinping staying in office this time and with no apparent successor in the Politburo's standing committee, the likelihood that he will remain in office after the 21st Party Congress in 2027 and serve a fourth term has increased. With the timing of the supreme leader's retirement uncertain, most of the assumptions made in analysing China's elite politics are no longer relevant. Even though Xi Jinping's retention was already anticipated, its long-term impact on Chinese politics will be significant.

As will be shown in the next section, the appointments were a complete victory for Xi Jinping. However, other aspects did not necessarily further strengthen Xi's authority as initially anticipated. The party chairman, once held by Mao Zedong, was not reinstated, nor was the title of 'people's leader', reminiscent of Mao, officially bestowed on Xi; the lengthy 'Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era' included in the Party Constitution at the 2017 Party Congress was never upgraded to 'Xi Jinping Thought'. Even the 'two establishments' (meaning the establishment of Xi Jinping's position as the core of the Party and of his ideology as that of the Party), which was widely referred to before the Party Congress, was not included in the Party Constitution. In the tug-of-war underwater, it seems only natural that Xi made compromises and concessions. Xi's authority has for the moment failed to deliver on these. However, Xi has secured another five-year term. It is conceivable that he will further consolidate his power, and that this could develop into a new position at the time of the Party Congress in 2027. In any case, there is no doubt that the Xi Jinping administration is rock solid. Xi's authority has not yet reached its peak and is still in the process of further development.

A whole pro-Xi top leadership group and the 'best and brightest' Politburo

The Politburo Standing Committee appointment was a complete victory for Xi Jinping. Li Keqiang and Wang Yang, who were expected to remain in the standing committee of the Politburo, were not re-elected as Central Committee members. The newly elected members were all close to Xi Jinping. In particular, Li Qiang and Ding Xuexiang were Xi Jinping's secretaries during his provincial career and are close confidants. With a complete victory in the top leadership group appointments, Xi Jinping will be able to run his administration as he wishes. In this sense, Xi's power establishment is further advanced and on solid ground. There are no longer any rivals who can distance themselves from Xi Jinping and sometimes express critical opinions. Outside observers fear that the Xi Jinping regime, like Mao Zedong's in the past, will be unable to stop becoming a personal dictatorship. In a situation where the supreme leader is surrounded by yes-men, he or she will not have access to critical opinions and negative information, increasing the likelihood of misjudging situations. While this risk is certainly present, it is also possible to think that the members of a trusted and close circle of people around him will be able to admonish Xi Jinping more frankly and honestly. As there is no information available on the actual relationships between Xi Jinping and his subordinates, it is not possible to discuss the issue definitively, and we will have to wait and see how things develop in the future.

It should be noted that in the State Council leadership formed at the National People's Congress in March 2023, Li Qiang has become the Premier and Ding Xuexiang the first Vice-Premier. Neither of them has any experience of serving in the State Council. The premierships had always been held by a person who had served as vice-premier, with the exception of the first premier Zhou Enlai, but that tradition is broken. Outside observers have also voiced concerns about this appointment.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Li Qiang has a wealth of administrative experience, having served as head of Zhejiang Province, an important region in the lower Yangtze River basin, secretary of the Party Committee of Jiangsu Province and secretary of the Party Committee of Shanghai.

Turning to the Politburo appointments, we see a more complex situation: the number of members has been reduced from 25 to 24, and there are no longer any women in the Politburo, despite one having been included for 20 years. Hu Chunhua, who is considered close to Hu Jintao and Li Keqiang, was unable to join the Politburo and was demoted to Central Committee member. Basically, the Politburo is solidly occupied by people who are loyal to Xi Jinping, and there is no doubt that the composition of the Politburo is more likely to reflect Xi Jinping's wishes. Although most of Xi's close subordinates from his time working in the provinces have already been selected, they do not make up a majority in the Politburo. Many Politburo members have made their careers as local cadres so do not necessarily have career links with Xi Jinping and, compared to Li Qiang and Ding Xuexiang, many of them do not have deep ties with Xi Jinping. It is not quite clear how unwavering their loyalty is, so some uncertainty does exist.

It should be pointed out that the appointments to the Politburo include many experts in science and engineering, especially in the defence and aerospace industries (Ma Xingrui, Zhang Guoqing, Yuan Jiajun, Chen Jining and Li Ganjie), and theorists who have served as senior officials in the Central Party School (Li Shulei and Shi Taifeng). They are, so to speak, China's version of a 'best and brightest' team. It is impossible to say for sure whether this will work in actual political management, but it would be short-sighted to regard them simply as a group of Xi Jinping's yes-men. There is still no one among them likely to succeed Xi Jinping, but they include several strong candidates for the next highest leadership groups, including Chen Jining, who is now secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee.

In addition, there are two members of the Politburo (Zhang Youxia and Wang Yi) who have passed the traditional retirement age of 68 but who head highly specialised departments: the uniformed military and the foreign affairs, respectively. Although these two exceptions may set important precedents in the future, the retirement age exception remains just that - a rare exception - made only for these two and Xi Jinping.

Continuity of foreign and security policies and the situation over Taiwan

With Xi Jinping remaining in office after the Party Congress in 2022, it can be assumed that China's future policies in various areas will be continuations of those of the previous decade. The most significant feature of the Xi Jinping administration's foreign and security policies will be the development of a foreign policy that puts great power consciousness at the forefront. China under

the Xi Jinping administration has shown a strong awareness of its status as a great power, expanding its influence around the world and competing with the US and Europe. This attitude is unlikely to change in the future. As a result, China's foreign policy is often seen as a hard-line stance, and tensions in Sino-American relations are likely to be long-term. From China's perspective, however, it does not necessarily want a confrontation with the US. China has always opposed the use of the term 'competition' to describe Sino-American relations, emphasizing the 'cooperation' aspect. The announcement made at the end of 2022 of the appointment of Qin Gang, China's ambassador to the US, as Minister of Foreign Affairs to take over from Wang Yi is clearly US-focussed.

The situation over the Taiwan Strait is likely to remain difficult. Xi long worked in Fujian Province on the opposite side of the Strait from Taiwan, and he has shown a strong interest in Taiwan. Since becoming supreme leader, he has repeatedly expressed his desire for Taiwan's reunification. Since the Tsai administration took power in Taiwan in 2016, the mainland has increased pressure on Taiwan, partly due to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government's refusal to recognise the '1992 Consensus'. The visit of US House Speaker Pelosi to Taiwan in 2022 further aggravated the situation over Taiwan, and the mainland escalated its military pressure on Taiwan. Concerns about the situation over Taiwan have been expressed by the countries involved, with US military officials in particular frequently referring to the possibility of the use of force against Taiwan by the mainland side. Among Western and Japanese military officials and security experts, an invasion of Taiwan by the mainland is already envisaged as quite realistic, and the debate is no longer whether it will happen but when. However, few China experts from other countries believe that an invasion of Taiwan by mainland China is realistic within the next few years. There seems to be some scope for adjustment in the way references are made to Taiwan, as in the report by Xi Jinping at the Party Congress, where he referred to the use of force against Taiwan as an option. However, this does not deviate from the existing policy on Taiwan. At present, there are no indications of major changes in China's Taiwan policy, and the existing policy of peaceful reunification remains in place. At present, the Xi Jinping administration's main concern is Taiwan's next presidential election.

In terms of personnel, the newly appointed uniformed head of the People's Liberation Army (Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission) He Weidong was the commander of the Eastern Theatre Command in charge of the Taiwan area. Many uniformed heads have been selected from units involved with Taiwan, and it appears the leadership is being positioned with a strong emphasis on Taiwan. Fujian, Zhejiang and Shanghai, where Xi Jinping spent most of his career, are all part of the former Nanjing Military Region, which oversees Taiwan, and it should be pointed out that Xi Jinping's personal connections lean heavily towards units involved with Taiwan.

Taiwan is also a major issue in China's relations with Japan. Sino-Japanese relations, which improved significantly for a time under the Abe administration, have been on a downward trend since around 2021. In particular, since the reference to the Taiwan situation made in the joint statement following the summit between Prime Minister Suga and President Biden in April 2021, the Chinese side has clearly intensified its criticism. And China further intensified its criticism after the former Prime Minister Abe's statement at a symposium held in Taiwan in December 2021 that "an emergency in Taiwan is an emergency in Japan as well as in the Japan-US alliance". At the same

time, however, China has shown a willingness to improve relations with Japan: at the first face-to-face meeting between Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Kishida in Bangkok in November 2022, Xi spoke frankly to Kishida even before the opening photo was taken, and both were photographed with the biggest smiles. Although there are many pending issues between Japan and China and it remains unclear whether relations will improve, there is no doubt that China is trying to stabilise relations with Japan amid the lack of improvement in US-China relations.

Sudden abandonment of the zero-Covid policy

Since the lockdown of Wuhan in 2020, China has continued to implement a Covid-19 control programme with strict measures known as the zero-Covid policy. Although people's social lives have been severely affected by the lockdown, the containment of the spread of Covid-19 has been successful to some extent. In December 2022, the Chinese government suddenly relaxed restrictions significantly, effectively abandoning the zero-Covid policy. The Xi Jinping administration has shown remarkable flexibility. The following factors may be responsible for this abrupt turnaround.

First, the damage caused to the economy by the zero-Covid policy was enormous. The impact of stopping production and economic activity following the urban lockdowns was obvious, not to mention the clearly growing dissatisfaction of enterprises. The costs associated with PCR testing and quarantine of infected persons, which were carried out daily throughout the country, were also enormous. It seems that the leadership was aware of the high risks of maintaining the zero-Covid policy any longer.

Second, the highly infectious Omicron strain was spreading rapidly and was said to have become uncontrollable as early as November. In other words, the zero-Covid policy, which focused on prevention, had already been breached and was unsustainable.

Third, as the government has repeatedly mentioned, the virulence of the Omicron strain is thought to be weaker than that of previous strains so, even if infections were to spread, the risk of serious illness was not considered to be very high.

Fourth, protests against the zero-Covid policy spread across the country, mainly among young people. A fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang, a city long under lockdown, led to spreading of rumours that several people had died because residents were unable to evacuate due to buildings being sealed off, and triggered mass mourning in various regions that developed into protests against the zero-Covid policy. Some participants even shouted "Step down, Communist Party!" "Step down, Xi Jinping!", slogans that were spread on WeChat and other social networking sites. Demonstrations were also held in Japan on several occasions. While it is unclear to what extent these protests had an impact, Xi Jinping explained during his meeting with European Council President Michel that people's discontent was behind the protests. It is only natural that they had a certain degree of impact.

The number of people infected with Covid-19 across China exploded, but the government stopped tracking this number, meaning it is no longer possible to get a full picture; the three-year-long zero-Covid policy focused on prevention rather than treatment, and the medical system has not been expanded sufficiently to meet the new situation. In addition, vaccination has not progressed

sufficiently, particularly among the elderly. Chinese vaccines are said to be less effective in preventing the disease than those from Pfizer and Moderna, but to be effective enough in preventing severe symptoms. However, the risk of serious illness is high because many elderly people have a strong aversion to vaccines, hindering vaccination progress. These uncertainties should also be borne in mind. Many deaths occurred during the explosive phase of the pandemic. No matter how much the virulence has weakened, the risk of serious illness is high for those with underlying diseases and the elderly. In addition, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the government and experts who do not release accurate information. On the other hand, many infected people recover quickly or are asymptomatic, prompting a growing realisation that Covid is not an infectious disease to be feared. It was said that infections would peak nationwide in February, but the spread of the disease was so rapid that most citizens, even in rural areas, have already been infected in January. People have resumed social and economic activities. Having overcome the peak of the outbreak, the government is promoting a three-year victory story in the fight against Covid-19. China, too, enters a post-pandemic era.

(The original Japanese version of this paper is dated January 16, 2023. The English version reflects some updates, including those on the Covid-19 situation and personnel appointments.)