

# **A stronger Xi Jinping means a more brittle Chinese state**

By **Geoff Raby**

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China's Communist Party's 19th Party Congress was a big win for Xi Jinping, a loss for China and a worry for the rest of the world. Xi has emerged officially as the most powerful leader of modern China since Mao Zedong. Only Mao had his "Thoughts" entered into the Constitution during his tenure in office. And on top of this, Xi's signature policy initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was also inscribed into the Constitution.

Over the past five years of his first term, Xi has determinedly set about consolidating and centralising power in his own hands. He established a number of "Leading Groups", which were eventually expanded to cover every major policy area from economic reform and financial policy to national security. In doing so, he relegated the State Council – equivalent to the Australian Cabinet – from being the country's main policy body to a mere implementer of policies. The Premier's role was greatly diminished.

In the biggest change in China's political system for decades, Xi has returned China to an earlier period of one-person rule. After returning to power in 1977, Deng Xiaoping established a system of collective leadership to avoid in future the chaos and instability of Mao's autocratic rule.

## **Xi above all others**

As reported by Angus Grigg in this paper, if anyone had any doubts that China has now returned to an earlier period, compare the front pages of the Party's official organ, the People's Daily, announcing the new leadership line up and five years ago when the last change was made. Five years ago, then Party Secretary Hu Jintao's photo was fractionally larger than the other Standing Committee members, emphasising that Hu was a leader among equals. This time, Xi's photo takes up the top half of the page and the rest of the Standing Committee are tiny figures below China's new "Great Leader".

Xi has also ditched another long-established practice by not appointing a successor(s) to the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau. Together, collective leadership and identifying a successor at the start of a leader's final five-year term were intended to ensure a smooth and orderly transition of power.

Deng had the remarkable vision to begin the process of institutionalising the transfer of power in an authoritarian one-party state and which continued for another 20 years

after Deng's death in 1997. This was widely viewed both inside and outside China as a significant and enduring achievement.

### **Transferring power**

In one-party states, the transfer of power from one leader to another can usually be done in one of three ways: dynastically as in North Korea; waiting for the leader to die in office while the system atrophies, as was the case in the former Soviet Union; or violently, which is perhaps the most common. China, it seemed, until now, had found another way that served it well for nearly 30 years.

Post the Congress, Xi is being portrayed in the Chinese media as a strong-man leader who can get things done. Defenders of Xi say China needs such a leader at this time to break through resistance to necessary but tough economic reforms and to tackle the power of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs). But in recent years, Xi, with all his previous power, seemed to have lost interest in economic reform, while SOE reform increasingly has come to mean amalgamating them into ever bigger conglomerates.

China's political system is now more brittle as a result of Xi's usurpation of power. He may use this newly acquired power to good effect but the constraints on bad decision-making are also that much weaker. Moreover, the question of leadership transition will never be far away. Already his decision not to appoint at least one Standing Committee member who is young enough to be his successor in 2022, when he should retire if past practice were to be followed, has fuelled speculation that Xi has no intention of stepping down in five years.

### **Food tasters in high demand**

Of course, since arrangements have become more arbitrary, Xi could increase the size of the Standing Committee and add two younger members at any time. But all of this newly created uncertainty at the highest levels of China's political system will only fan speculation and encourage court intrigue around the leadership. As there are in effect no rules for passing on power, only Xi's dictate, what should happen if he were to die? The Premier is head of the government, not the Party. Food tasters are likely to be in high demand in Beijing.

It is extraordinary that such a thing could be said – even in jest – about the political system of the world's second biggest economy. China is the worse for it. As has been becoming obvious in recent years as Xi has inexorably taken control, the risks for China are not on the economic side but nearly all on the political.

In the Congress' wake, a sense of hubris pervades the Chinese official media and public commentary. Xi's ascendancy is being portrayed as showing the superiority of China's system at a time of apparent weakness in the West and that an inflection point has been reached in world affairs. There is even talk of a China "model", which may be relevant for other countries. This is also new.

## **Without constraint**

The rest of the world should be concerned. A less institutionally grounded political system – and hence a more brittle one – raises the risk of political instability higher than it has been at any time since the Party fractured in 1989 over the Tiananmen Square student protests. In world terms, China's economy was tiny then, so the collapse of economic growth for two years had little impact beyond China. That would not be the case now.

Xi has also made it clear that his ambition is to take China to the forefront of world military powers. As the "Chairman of Everything", including the Central Military Commission, the rest of the world will need to become accustomed to working with and managing a leader of a major power who can act without constraints.

*Geoff Raby is chairman and CEO of Geoff Raby & Associates and a former Ambassador to China. He is an Associate of China Matters.*