The global implications of Xi Jinping’s formidable power

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The global implications of Xi Jinping’s formidable power

OPINION by ERIKA SIMPSON

Already, the Chinese Communist Party has built one of the world’s most effective digital surveillance systems; in future, it could strangle any remaining shreds of resistance inside and outside the party.

Proclaimed for a third term in power along with six men who now make up the totalitarian party’s internal leadership cabal, Chinese President Xi Jinping forebodingly emphasized the prospect of violent reunification with Taiwan, asserting that “we will never renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures.”

The new members of the most powerful political bodies were revealed at the twice-a-decade congress last week. Contenders for power like Vice Premier Hu Chunhua were purged from the Politburo. The former general secretary Hu Jintao was unceremoniously escorted from the ceremonies. An announcement that the release of China’s GDP and various economic data would be indefinitely delayed pointed to a seismic shift away from former Chinese leader
Deng Xiaoping’s economic-centered development strategy toward policy that would ensure the survival, at any cost, of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Faced with stark choices, Xi chose his cabal’s interest in survival, not the underlying interests of the Chinese people. He could have announced, in the wake of the COVID pandemic, that the CCP would undertake meaningful political reform that would reinvigorate Chinese civil society. He could have chosen to support innovation in order to fuel continued economic growth. Doing so would have satisfied China’s business elite and bourgeoning middle class as money trickled down to prevent open dissent.

Now the country will have a tough time governing itself. Xi refrained from political reform, and repeatedly congratulated his own government’s record for decisions that maintain the status quo. This implies the Chinese will increase their internal security controls to keep the CPP in power, at the cost of the Chinese people’s future prospects.

Unlike Russia’s Communist party, China’s CCP will not magically collapse. The party will remain in power for the foreseeable future; but now the Chinese people, as well as Western audiences, are painfully aware that Xi will bring the Chinese people into the next century armed as a surveillance state. Already, the CCP has built one of the world’s most effective digital surveillance systems; in future, it could strangle any remaining shreds of resistance inside and outside the Communist Party.

Now, the primary interest of the CPP—survival—has come into direct conflict with the primary interest of the people: development. Before, rampant economic growth made social and political discontent in China palatable. Now the painful truth is unmasked: the party is bent on its own survival, not on any measures of meaningful political reform. Previously, high economic growth
was a panacea: however, continued high growth will be untenable because the Chinese environment will not allow the freedom to exchange innovative ideas.

Instead of being contained, China will contain itself. With this speech, Xi further antagonized the West, an economy and territory thrice its size. China will continue to manufacture cheap products for North America’s dollar stores, and the United States will continue to hold a negative trading deficit with China of approximately US$1–trillion. Meanwhile, the West will become much more cautious about exporting sophisticated technology to China that can be exploited for malign purposes.

Xi’s elderly inner circle could try to rule for generations into the future, but as the aggrieved, xenophobic leadership becomes more closed and hostile, it will more severely restrict freedom of any kind, ruthlessly eliminating dissent. As a result, more countries in South America and Africa will need to choose between joining free market liberal economic democracies—like the United States, Canada, and Europe—or partnering with a creaking Marxist state where high-income inequality may be tolerated, but always in favour of expanding state-owned enterprises.

The beleaguered Chinese people will expect to see more take-overs of private corporations and forced bankruptcies. Higher unemployment combined with inflation and a tighter housing market—despite the population’s slow decline—will make life more miserable for millions of Chinese who recently rose from poverty into the middle class.

There will be more stringent foreign exchange controls, including controls on foreign visitors and international tourism. Excessive micromanagement and high surveillance, combined with Xi’s aggressive talk about China’s forceful reunification approach toward Taiwan, signalled that China’s foreign policy
toward its other neighbours, like North Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, will be more openly patriarchal and chauvinistic.

Xi ineptly signalled, too soon, that his regime will become more unprincipled in practice as well as in diplomatic parlance. The mask is off the authoritarian leader, ensuring continual cyber defence operations against China by the United States and its NATO allies. Faced with China’s economic exploitation of developing countries in Africa, more undemocratic regimes will try to receive China’s digital surveillance exports.

Xi heralded the party will further undermine—not undergird—multilateral institutions including international law for its own purposes. The emerging great power has far fewer strategic and tactical nuclear weapons than Russia and the United States, but Xi’s duplicitous words and lack of any effort, whatsoever, to place women in power (for the first time in 25 years there will be absolutely no women on the politburo) will unite the progressive left and women against the Asian hegemon.

The United States and Canada could entirely block sophisticated technology, like Huawei, and somehow protect Taiwan’s exporters, like its semiconductor industry. But federal investment screening agencies will also need to prevent China’s take-over of less critical elements of Canada’s infrastructure, like potash companies in Saskatchewan. Under-Arctic-ice exploration and Chinese travel under the icy Northwest Passage will need more scrutiny and protection.

This century is already marred by a crazy Russian inner cabal, a new central front in Europe, and increased spending on conventional warfare in Europe. Combined with an increasingly sinister China that confronts a divided and polarized America in the wake of November’s democratic elections, there could not be more bad news. China’s 69-year-old leader has consolidated power, like 70-year-old Russian President Vladimir Putin, but at least 79-year-old Joe
Biden and 50-year-old Justin Trudeau have proven adept at fending off different challenges.

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