



## An Expert Explains: Understanding China's proposed 'Centenary Leap' to the Mao Era

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Written by **Major General (retd) G G Dwivedi**, Edited by Explained Desk | Chandigarh |

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As per Chinese tradition, dynastic bloodlines were never the criterion to determine the chain of succession. It was always the capable ministers or the victorious generals who were bestowed the 'mandate of heaven', an ancient Chinese belief.

The Communist Party of China (CPC) has implicitly followed the norm. Mao Zedong, First Generation Communist Leader, secured the mandate as the founder of the Red Army and the People's Republic China (PRC). Deng Xiaoping, who succeeded Mao, was a distinguished military commander and a core member of the CPC. The next

three generational leaders — Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping — went through a systematic selection process to earn their spurs.

Given the opaque system followed by the CPC, those who study or deal with China are often bewildered by the mixed signals and actions of the Communist leadership, and find it extremely difficult to make clear interpretations.

Contrary to some initial Western expectations, China's economic prosperity has not led to any political reforms. And Beijing's growing aggressive behaviour under Xi in the quest for a 'Centenary Leap' into the 'Mao Era' belies China's claims of a 'peaceful' rise.

### **Xi, the 'Paramount Leader'**

Xi's ascent to the top makes a unique case. The son of a Communist Revolution hero. Xi Zhongxun, junior Xi as a 'red princeling' had a privileged childhood. But when his father was purged in 1966, Xi's schooling was disrupted. Two years later, during Mao's Cultural Revolution, the 15-year-old Xi was among the millions of young people from cities who were sent to the countryside as farm hands to learn from peasants.

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Xi joined the CPC in 1974 at the age of 21, and moved up the Party hierarchy smoothly, chaperoned by the senior Xi, who had been rehabilitated by then. He burst on the political scene as the graft-fighting Governor of Fujian in 1999, and assumed the mantle of the 'Fifth Generation Leadership' in 2012.

Given his mild demeanour, it was assumed that Xi would abide by the Party's constitutional rule. However, he played his hand differently, and went on to emerge as the most powerful leader after Mao himself. Singapore's statesman Lee Kuan Yew had described Xi as a person with a soul of iron, even as he compared him with the likes of [Nelson Mandela](#).

### **Control over Party and military**

Xi swiftly consolidated his position by strengthening his hold on twin the levers of power, the CPC and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). He launched an unbridled campaign to clean the system of corruption, resulting in the punishment of more than a million cadres, including high-ranking civil and military officials. The anti-corruption drive also proved handy to purge prominent political rivals like Bo Xilai.



Simultaneously, Xi initiated deep-rooted military reforms so as to make the PLA a modern fighting force at par with the US military by 2027. The rationale was two-fold: to prepare the military for China's expanding global role, and to establish firm control of the Party over the PLA in consonance with Mao's dictum; 'Party controls the Gun'.

At the 19th Party Congress held in 2017, Xi further strengthened his grip over the Party, and a year later, discarded the two-term limit to the Presidency to become the life-long incumbent. "Xi Jinping's Thoughts for New Era Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" were enshrined in the Communist Party's constitution; an honour that had so far been reserved only for Mao and Deng; and he was given the status of Lingxiu (highly revered leader).

Xi's "China Dream" envisions a "powerful and prosperous" China; and acquiring the status of a "great modern socialist country" by the middle of the century. With the

reorganization of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest defence body, Xi appointed himself as the Commander-in-Chief of the PLA.

### **No more ‘hide and bide’**

Abandoning Deng’s policy of “hide and bide”, Xi advocated that China should play a greater role in international affairs. Instead of security alliances and the partnership format adopted by the United States, Xi has chosen the geo-economic route.

His Belt-Road Initiative (BRI), a trillion-dollar venture, seeks to enlarge China’s influence across the globe through mega connectivity projects, employing chequebook diplomacy and debt traps. Xi’s alternative model to Western democracies is characterised by “authoritarian political structure-state driven capitalism”.

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Under Xi, China has managed to control the [coronavirus](#), and to claim a victory that has eluded almost every other country. The Chinese economy has registered a 6.8 per cent growth in the first quarter of the year 2021. To stand out as a strong world leader, Xi has upped the ante in disputed areas, including the South and East China Seas and the Eastern Ladakh region of India. Internally too, Xi has tightened the grip over Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang to ensure a conducive periphery.

### **‘Centenary Leap’ into Mao-Era Greatness**

In March this year, during the ‘Two Sessions’ (Lianghui) of the National People’s Congress (NPC), a rubber-stamp parliamentary body, the Chinese People’s Consultative Conference (CPPCC) approved the 14th Five Year Plan (2021-25) and laid out Xi’s ‘Vision 2035’.

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The salient themes of the Vision include prioritizing quality growth, achieving ‘Common Prosperity’, elevating China’s leadership role in global governance, and managing the rivalry with the US. A major overhaul is envisaged in the Chinese

economy, as it adopts the ‘Dual Circulation’ system of boosting domestic consumption and reducing dependence on exports markets.

China marked the CPC Centenary on July 1 with ceremonial “pomp and splendour”. Xi, attired in a grey Mao suit, graced the occasion from the same ramparts as Mao had done while announcing the establishment of the PRC on October 1, 1949.

During an hour-long speech projecting himself as a formidable leader, Xi declared that the Chinese people would never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate the nation. He attributed Party’s capability and strength of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” to Marxism.

### **In the footsteps of Mao**

Xi’s radical measures are aimed to steer China back to the “Mao Era”, as he firmly believes that a return to original Maoism is the only way to secure China’s future. Since assuming office, Xi has constantly referred to Mao of the 1930s; his “Three Rules of Discipline”, “Eight Points of Attention” for PLA soldiers, and the “Eight Points Rules” for Party officials.

His great affinity for Mao dates back to his Liangjicun village days in Yan’an prefecture, once a famous bastion of Communist revolutionaries. Xi attributes the qualities that define him today to the “yellow earth attachment” (huang tudi qinjie) of his rural life experience. Xi’s ‘Yan’an Rectification Movement’, announced on 8 July 2020, is in sync with Mao’s 1942-style political campaign, wherein thousands of Communists leaders were purged.

As per Xi, in 1950, “USSR was idealised as China of tomorrow”. However, today the challenge is, “USSR of yesterday must not become the China of tomorrow.” The first pledge Xi made on taking over as General Secretary of the CPC was never to let the Party meet the fate of the Soviet Union Communist Party. He attributed the Soviet collapse to the dissolution of the Communist Party, whose ideals and conviction had wavered.

According to the historian and sinologist Francois Godement, Xi's "China dream" is a resurrection of "Mao's Totalitarianism" with a technologically advanced toolkit. With his loyalists dominating the all-powerful Politburo and handpicked Generals holding key positions in the PLA, Xi seemingly appears poised for a third five-year term, to be decided during the 20th Party Congress in Autumn 2022.

### **Poised for the 'centenary leap to greatness'**

Xi has telescoped the timelines for China to acquire "great power" status by 2035, given its astonishing pace of rise over the last two decades, emerging as a serious rival to the US. Many are of the view that Xi is overplaying his hand, considering that China may be externally formidable but remains internally fragile. Xi is aware that any threat to the rule of the Communist Party can manifest into an existential crisis; evident from his oft repeated calls demanding unflinching loyalty from both Party and Military.

The Communist leadership is known for its adaptability. Therefore, Xi could strike a conciliatory chord at home to ensure internal stability. On the international arena, Xi may well pursue the traditional policy of dividing the adversaries, pitting "one barbarian against the other", and playing the 'sovereignty' card alongside, raking up territorial disputes to leverage nationalism, in pursuit of his political goals.

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There appears to be broad consensus amongst China watchers that barring a catastrophe or a 'Black Swan' occurrence, the present regime is expected to hold fast for the foreseeable future. However, it will largely depend on how Xi chooses to play his hand. The world will be hoping to continuously monitor Xi's mind to cope with the challenges and ramifications of China's "centenary leap" to greatness.

*(The author is a war veteran, former Assistant Chief, Integrated Defence Staff, and has served as Defence Attaché in China. He is currently a professor of strategic and international studies)*

