



The Once and Future Emperor

— Will Truban, 7 April 2018



Ohio— In late February, the [New York Times reported](#) the Chinese Communist Party would repeal the term limits for the presidency and in [March](#) it made that effort a reality. While ostensibly innocuous in its actionable substance, such a move represents a dramatic break from their bureaucratic structure and institutional commitment to avoiding investing power solely in one person. This does not come as a great shock to China watchers as the current President and Party Chairman in China Xi Jinping failed to appoint anyone to the Politburo Standing Committee (the principle governing body) that might be a [reasonable successor](#). However, such a fateful decision is guaranteed to emit a shockwave that will dramatically affect the geopolitical calculus of the world over the next few decades.

After Deng Xiaoping had secured power in the wake of Mao Zedong's death in 1976, he moved to write a [new constitution](#) that took effect in 1982. This constitution focused on limiting the terms of a president to two. Presidencies have typically been filled by the Chairman of the Communist Party, a trend [dating back to Jiang Zemin's](#)

assumption of the Presidency in 1993. A President and Chairman are expected to serve for ten years, not overstay their welcome, and designate a successor to the Politburo as well as begin transferring power to them in the second term. This was the case for Xi Jinping when he was selected to serve in Hu Jintao's second term and assumed the Presidency in 2013.



However, Xi Jinping has not designated or selected any successor to the Politburo. Currently, all other members of the Politburo are over 60, making them unsuitably old for possible ascension to the Presidency or Chairmanship due to age limits put in place by Deng Xiaoping. This lack of a designated individual would not have been a dramatic change in itself, as it was presumed possible that Xi Jinping would stay on as Chairman of the Party and allow a new person to become President then become Chairman in the second term. The substantial change implemented by the Politburo indicates **Xi Jinping's power** within the Communist Party as well as his desire to further his control over state functions and policymaking.

In China, the State is subjugated to the will of the Party. To control the Communist Party is to control the State. As I have stressed in a [previous ITS article](#), the Chinese state may technically have the power of enacting policies and exercising authority, but it is the Party that makes this power a reality. Technically, China has two leaders, the President and the Chairman. The President rules the state and its different functional departments while the Chairman is the Communist Party Leader who exercises explicit control over the framework and ideology of the Party. While typically these positions are held by the same person, it is possible for a Chairman to operate within the Party and control the President using Party frameworks and dynamics, [as Mao Zedong did with Liu Shaoqi](#).



In short, this proposal is part of the new reassertion of personality politics and nationalistic fervor in what has been a largely bureaucratically institutionalized regime in China. The Party since Deng Xiaoping has acted in a technocratic role focused on implementing the [Four Modernizations](#) and promoting economic growth as a basis for legitimacy. This decision may harken a shift away from that approach and back to the more ideological credentials present in the opening years of the People's Republic of China. In fact, [not since Mao](#) has one leader in China been able to cast aside existing coalitions for their own vision of the future. Until now.

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Xi Jinping has proven that he is on track to be a 21st Century Chairman Mao for a 21st Century China. To have the control and power needed to enact constitutional changes as well as to write his name into the Chinese Constitution as was done during the People's Congress of 2017 is no small feat. Now it seems that Xi Jinping will be around for longer than the ten years we expected him to be to enact the reforms he has outlined for both the domestic audience in China and the International Community. This is part of a concerted effort to position China as a restored and stable international leader to be clearly juxtaposed with the deteriorating position of the incumbent United States.

One of these key positions is the desire for a **moderately prosperous society** by 2020 that might avert the middle-income trap and allow for China to become the economic heavy weight it has historically been. From there, the goal would be to become a “great modern socialist country” by 2050. Yet for Xi Jinping, this is merely a prologue for what is to come. Before his rise to the national stage, Xi Jinping **made a name for himself** based on his own rigorous work ethic and his belief that the Party had strayed too far from its socialist values. While we may be seeing statist-capitalism as the principle force in the Chinese economy, it would be important not to assume that this will always be the dynamic. Xi Jinping is not a Maoist intent on smashing the powers that be but he is a dedicated socialist and it would make sense for him to use his new power to begin pushing for a revitalization of those values.



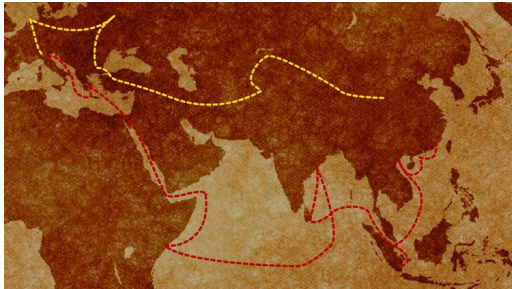
The key criticism of the Chinese Communist Party in its early years of governance was that China lacked the conditions needed for socialism of any type to work. As the Soviets quickly learned, one cannot just make a socialist society out of a semi-feudal environment. In order to run through the steps, the early People’s Republic of China under Mao actually adopted facets of capitalism up **until 1954**. During this time period, merchant activity was encouraged and capitalist elements were permitted to engage China with economic development. In order for a revolution of the proletariat to take place, you need a bourgeoisie to overthrow. Once this group had served its purpose, it was quickly expunged by the Party. Who is not to say that Xi Jinping is not laying the groundwork for a new revival of communism for the 21st century?

Since Deng Xiaoping shifted the goals of the party towards economic growth and reform, China’s economy has skyrocketed. Much of the hallmarks of communism that

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we attribute to the Maoist period have been done away with as **state-owned enterprises compete** with domestic and foreign companies and **foreign direct investment remains high** even in a period of economic uncertainty. It is already the premiere trading partner for much of the world, has outlined a clear plan for economic development in underdeveloped Eurasia, and has grown its consumer base to become one of the most important markets in the world. At the current rate, it is on track **occupy 20% of the global economy by 2050**.

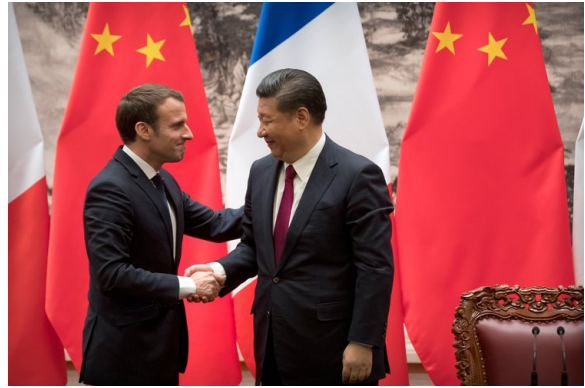
If anything, these are exactly the conditions Xi Jinping needs to restart the socialist experiment. China adopted capitalist traits in order to make things work. It is a society that focuses on efficacy rather than ideological functionalism. Yet, the Chinese have also seen the stagnation in the West and the inequalities of other authoritarian countries. Xi Jinping is a veteran of the Cultural Revolution and remembers the horrifying acts desperate, zealous people may commit. What we now see is a possibility for a communist transition to occur without the violence it previously maintained under Mao. A new nationalist fervor and a strategic supreme leader empowers Xi Jinping to methodically plot China's way to where he wants to go and it is important to note that the Chinese do not establish goals without reason. Socialism has long been the stated goal of Chinese Communist Party and it would be foolish to believe that they eschewed that effort in the long term.



The other critical element being pushed by Xi Jinping is the **Community of Common Destiny** alongside the famous Belt and Road Initiative. Each of these serves a particular purpose for Chinese strategy. The Community of Common

Destiny focuses on countering the American dominated world order with one that is not openly imposing and intervening in a nation's internal affairs. The Belt and Road Initiative **helps to cement this Community** as it connects and restores the Eurasian land bridge that was usurped by European maritime connections and networks. Such an effort helps to establish Chinese influence over its neighbors through economic strength so that its own ethnically diverse borderlands do not threaten the center. In either case, these initiatives represent a clear, coherent strategy by Beijing standing in sharp contrast to the inconsistent and retrenching policies of the United States.

Over the past 20 years the United States foreign policy has lacked continuity, leading many nations to **increasingly view it as unreliable**. In an age of global uncertainty, being unreliable is a geopolitical death sentence that will only result in isolation from without. This is contrasted with Xi's China that exemplifies stable, strategic action, many of America's allies are far more



likely to view China as a more stable, viable collaborator for the assortment of issues being faced today. The War on Terror destroyed what moral **credibility** the United States had coming out of the Cold War and **stalled up** what was seen as an all-powerful war machine. The 2008 Financial Collapse **undermined the economic example** of the United States as nations saw a government incapable of reigning in the excesses of its private sector. Finally, the Trump Administration's foreign policy has put the nail in the coffin of current American power with their withdrawals from major multilateral deals and anachronistic focus on **belligerence** and **bilateralism**. China is not openly imposing on any nation, while the United States under President Trump seems intent on browbeating anyone who isn't prepared to take what they offer.

With the opportunity to take on a greater role at a convenient time when the world leader wants a lesser one, Xi Jinping is perfectly placed to push his policies and follow through on his desires to restore the Middle Kingdom. The Chinese tend to speak in one of two ways about policy: very literally or very metaphorically. Many interesting policies have been spoken about in metaphors, such as the **need to "clean one's house"** and "make a new kitchen." However, Xi Jinping has spoken too specifically about his plans for a moderately prosperous society and a China centered Eurasian economic sphere to be written off as symbolic. For many, the continuation of Xi Jinping is simply the rise of another personalist autocrat, but the development is more significant than that. After all, Xi Jinping is just getting started and China is not the backwater it once was.

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