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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# 'Xi Jinping Thought' Makes China a Tougher Adversary

The party ratifies it as a Marxist 'breakthrough,' consolidating his power and expanding its control.

By Kevin Rudd

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President Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping

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A week is a long time in international politics. Last Monday U.S.-China relations were in free-fall. This coming Monday, President Biden and General Secretary Xi Jinping will have had their first full (albeit virtual) summit, following the surprise statement by their envoys in Glasgow on their resolve to work together on climate.

In the intervening week, Mr. Xi has concluded a major plenum of the Chinese Communist Party, which further entrenched his power. This is likely to make him an even more formidable adversary for the U.S.

Annual plenums are the mechanism through which the 95-million-member party

defines the parameters of official ideology, political discourse and policy direction. But this plenum was different. It's the first time since the era of Deng Xiaoping that the party has produced a formal resolution on party history, which now officially defines Mr. Xi's political position within the Chinese Communist pantheon.

There have only been three such resolutions in the party's 100-year history, and they are always major, epoch-defining events. With this resolution the party has elevated Mr. Xi and "Xi Jinping Thought" to a status that puts them beyond critique. Because both are now entrenched as objective historical truth, to criticize Mr. Xi is to attack the party and even China itself. Mr. Xi has rendered himself politically untouchable.

In the hard world of political practice, this has five implications. First, Chinese Communists, as historical materialists, have an ideological fetish for periodizing, trying to identify where they are in their relentless march toward a socialist society and the restoration of China as the most powerful country on earth. Officially, there are now three periods in Chinese Communist history: the Mao Zedong era, when China restored national unity and expelled foreign colonialists; the Deng era, when China became prosperous; and now the Xi era, when China is to become globally powerful.

Second, the resolution reconfirms Mr. Xi's position as the core of party leadership and emphasizes that this is of "decisive significance"—a critical phrase—for China. The plenum communiqué is replete with praise for Mr. Xi's leadership, demonstrating a cult of personality that would have been political anathema under Deng. Internal disagreement won't be tolerated as Mr. Xi campaigns to be reappointed (effectively as leader for life) at the party congress next fall.

Third, to buttress Mr. Xi's leadership claim, the resolution asserts that Xi Jinping Thought is "the Marxism of contemporary China and for the 21st century," "a new breakthrough in adapting Marxism" that plays a "guiding role" for the new era. Mr. Xi has long emphasized that the party must never repudiate the ideologies of Mao and Deng, as both served their historical purpose. Xi Jinping Thought is likely to become a hybrid—drawing from Mao's emphasis on ideology, politics and struggle while retaining Deng's priority on economic development, even while redressing the resulting inequalities. Most important, Xi Jinping Thought is a

malleable ideological tool to legitimize whatever political course Mr. Xi deems necessary in the future.

Fourth, Xi Jinping Thought is not devoid of policy content. At a broad level, it takes Chinese politics to the left by establishing a more powerful role for the party over the professional apparatus of the Chinese state—and over the previously expanded freedoms of academics, artists, religious believers, minorities and civil society. It also takes China's economics to the left, with a greater role for the party over the market, greater power for state-owned enterprises, a renewed doctrine of national self-reliance, more constraints on the private sector, and more redistribution of wealth. And it takes Chinese nationalism to the right, in a more assertive Chinese foreign and security policy. But Xi Jinping Thought will remain politically elastic in the real world of domestic and international politics, depending on the practical challenges of the day.

Fifth, there is the resolution's effect on China's place in the world. Here the language becomes more expansive. It offers the developing world a new model that China believes works, as opposed to the democratic world's model that it says doesn't—as demonstrated by what China argues is its superior response to Covid-19. It boasts of the Marxist basis of that model. And in launching the communiqué, officials lambasted a crumbling America by citing U.S. public opinion, contrasting it with alleged public support in China for the Chinese model, thereby reinforcing Mr. Xi's political narrative on the correctness of Marxism-Leninism, the decline of the West, and the rise of the East.

We haven't yet seen the final text of the historical resolution. At this stage, however, it seems clear Mr. Xi has had a major political win. He's on track to rule China through at least five American presidencies. Which is why the U.S. needs urgently to establish a long-term, bipartisan national China strategy through to 2035 and beyond.

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