

China: Times Are Changing for a Country that Wanted to Change

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There is much about modern China to appreciate. Its streets are usually safe. The economy, especially in the populous eastern provinces, has seen incredible growth not witnessed at any other time in history. Extreme poverty has been greatly diminished. Just under 800 million people have been lifted out of the classification in China in the last three decades. There is widespread wealth inequality but China, according to the World Bank, is an upper-middle-income country. These are metrics of success that will be highlighted when Xi Jinping goes for an unprecedented third presidential term, later this year, to cement his reputation close to Mao Zedong’s and ahead of Deng Xiaoping, the architect of modern China.

But there is another narrative that keeps the lights burning at night at the leadership compound off Tiananmen Square.

The property sector, a key engine of growth accounting for about 25 percent of the economy, has seen its foundations crumble under the weight of billions of dollars of debt. Big tech companies have bled trillions of dollars as Beijing tried to curb their excess profits and make sure the party retained influence over them.

Xi’s rule has come at a price. What little political dissent there was has been crushed, political rivals jailed, the Uighurs in Xinjiang are being persecuted and the Taiwanese are threatened with forceful re-unification. Xi’s targeting of corruption is in reality a ploy to silence political enemies. The gutted party hierarchy, from provincial leaders up, is unable to launch any obvious challenge.

Covid has seen Shanghai, the country’s commercial heart, go into lockdown. China prides itself on its management of the pandemic but that seems more than a touch premature. The economy was meant to emerge stronger as the rest of the world struggled with outbreaks of new strains of the virus. Now China’s economy is facing headwinds never before

experienced. Most of its citizens have no memory of an economy doing anything other than growing spectacularly. Those days are over.

And the very system for the transfer of power is being upended. A conference in either October or November, the date has not been decided yet, will see Xi hail his achievements but ignore the two-term presidential limit.

This clears a path for him to stay in power until he decides to step down. The power of paramount leaders, firmly entrenched in office with the barrel of the gun pointing at their opponents, can survive tremendous buffeting, as proven by Mao.

Before Xi became leader, in 2012, the party had a workable system for the peaceful transfer of power. The two leaders who preceded Xi in office, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, strictly adhered to it. After the horrors of the cultural revolution, stability was prized. Those days, too, are over. This is how it's meant to work. At the National Congress, a meeting normally held every five years, members to the party's central committee are elected by carefully chosen and reliable delegates.

This committee then elects the general secretary (the president) and a body called the Politburo Standing Committee (seven currently, but can have eleven) to lead the nation for the next five years. Two five-year terms was, before Xi, considered the limit.

It's cumbersome but it has provided stability. In 1980 Deng, then 75, [said](#): "We must take the long-term interest into account and solve the problem of the succession in leadership." He did not mean one man to remain leader for life.

Globally, the country's image has been tarnished. China is trying to ride two horses on Ukraine. Refusing to condemn Russia and calling for peace. Sanctions will be imposed on China, the US threatens, if it supplies military aid to Russia or tries to help it evade the West's sanctions. China is the glaringly obvious market for Russia's energy and commodity exports that are being mostly, though not entirely, shunned by the West. China signed a \$188 billion long-term oil and gas deal with Russia just ahead of the Ukraine invasion. Much of that money will be spent by Russia on improving its pipeline infrastructure.

But what should be a momentous year for Xi and China is not going according to script. Too many surprises. And in the leadership compound off Tiananmen Square, surprises are viewed with a great deal of suspicion.

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