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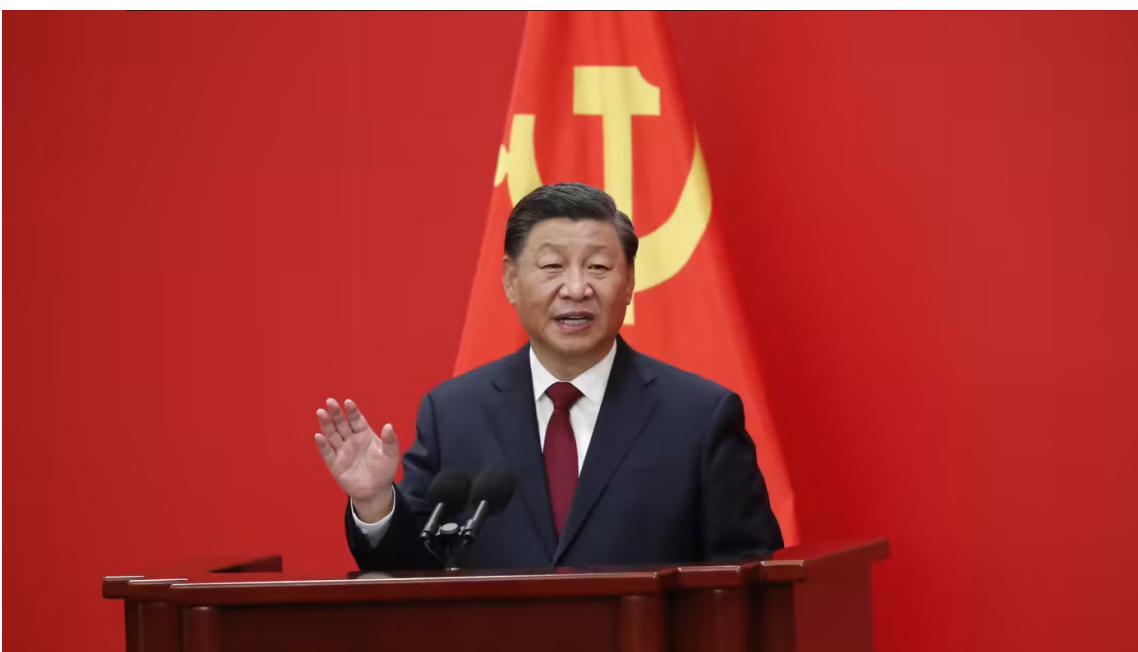
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Chinese politics & policy

Xi unveils loyalist leadership team to cement consolidation of power

Chinese president purges rivals from the Communist party's top echelons to expand his power



Four new Xi allies were appointed to the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee © MARK R CRISTINO/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Tom Mitchell in Singapore, **Primrose Riordan** and **Gloria Li** in Hong Kong and **Ryan McMorrow** in Shanghai 9 HOURS AGO

Xi Jinping officially secured a third term as the Chinese Communist party's head and unveiled a new leadership team packed with loyalists, a day after orchestrating the removal of former rival Li Keqiang from the party's top ranks and further consolidating his grip on power.

In what is normally the climax of party congresses, held every five years to appoint the party's leaders, Xi on Sunday walked on to a red carpet trailed by the officials who will sit on his seven-member Politburo Standing Committee. Four of the officials are new appointees.

"I was re-elected as general secretary," Xi said in a Sunday speech. "We will work diligently in the performance of our duties to prove ourselves worthy of the great trust of the party and our people."

But the unveiling of the leadership this year was eclipsed by the closing session of the party's 20th congress on Saturday, during which Xi's predecessor was [escorted off](#) the leadership rostrum. State media did not immediately report the incident and censors blocked social media accounts that circulated video clips or commented about it.

China's official Xinhua news agency later said on Twitter that Hu Jintao, 79, "insisted on attending the closing session despite the fact that he has been taking time to recuperate recently".

“When he was not feeling well during the session, his staff, for his health, accompanied him to a room next to the meeting venue for a rest,” it added. “Now he is much better.”

Xi trumpeted the strength of China’s economy and said its “strong fundamentals will not change”. Xi’s controversial zero-Covid policy has dramatically slowed economic growth and made travelling in and out of China extremely difficult, with no significant relaxations in sight.

Two members of the Politburo Standing Committee, Premier Li Keqiang and Wang Yang, were not reappointed despite being young enough for another five-year term. Li, a protégé of Hu who has been largely sidelined by Xi over the past decade, was originally a contender to succeed Hu as party leader and president in 2012.

Eswar Prasad, a China expert at Cornell University, said the appointments constituted “quite a show of force by Xi”.

Prasad added: “I see some dark days ahead as Xi now turns to rallying the country behind his muscular foreign policy vision.”

Besides Xi, anti-corruption tsar Zhao Leji and ideological guru Wang Huning remain on the Politburo Standing Committee but will be given new portfolios.

The committee’s four new members are all Xi allies and include, in order of rank: Shanghai party boss Li Qiang, Beijing party chief Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang and Li Xi, the party’s highest ranking official in southern Guangdong province. The rankings suggest Li Qiang will succeed Li Keqiang as premier, although government positions will not be confirmed until China’s parliament convenes its annual session in March.

“It represents a massive consolidation of Xi’s power that is unprecedented since the Mao era,” said Neil Thomas, senior China analyst at the consultancy Eurasia Group.

Li Qiang, the party’s top official in Shanghai, presided over mainland China’s worst Covid-19 outbreak in March. His administration responded by enforcing a harsh lockdown that crushed economic activity in one of the country’s most prosperous regions.

Li’s ascension “showcases to everyone that loyalty rather than popularity is the key”, said Yang Zhang, a professor at American University in Washington. “The disaster of the Shanghai lockdown did not stop Li’s elevation precisely because he followed Xi’s orders despite all criticism.”

Xi also replaced more than half the members of the 24-member politburo. Many of

the new appointees worked for Xi when he was mid-career provincial party official. No women were appointed to the politburo, breaking with a long convention of appointing a single female cadre to the group.

Foreign minister Wang Yi was also promoted to the politburo, putting him in line to replace Yang Jiechi as the party's top diplomat.

Additional reporting by Xinning Liu and Nian Liu in Beijing, Edward White in Seoul and Eleanor Olcott in Hong Kong

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