

ASIA

# China's Communist Party hands Xi an endless rule for flexing power

By [Lily Kuo](#) and [Christian Shepherd](#)

October 23, 2022 at 12:40 a.m. EDT

A somber Xi Jinping walked across the plush red stage of the Great Hall of the People in Beijing and took his place at the center. A line of men followed silently behind, falling in on both sides of him.

And with that one short, stiff walk and a quick wave, Xi was anointed Sunday as China's uncontested leader for five, if not many more years, as he concentrates power to a degree not seen since the days of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, and positions his country defiantly against the West.

At a party plenum on Sunday that followed the close of the twice-a-decade Communist Party congress, Xi secured a third term as general secretary and head of the Central Military Commission, the party's two most important positions. The men at his side, all allies, make up the newly chosen members of the seven-member standing committee, the party's apex of power. Xi is at the top.

It marks the pinnacle of a decade of consolidating power and a new chapter of uncertainty for the ruling Communist Party as Xi upsets norms decades in the making.

The Chinese people, led by the party, have put in "sweat and toil" to "open a Chinese path to modernization," Xi said in a speech Sunday. "The enormity of the task is what makes it great and infinitely glorious," he said.

By not stepping down after two terms, Xi has defied unspoken rules that previous leaders instated in hopes of institutionalizing peaceful transitions of power and preventing a return to Mao-style one-man rule. The 69-year-old Xi — who in 2018 abolished presidential term limits, a sign that he would not follow the unspoken principle — has not designated a potential successor.

"There is no bottom line. All the rules have been broken," said Cai Xia, a former professor at the Central Party School who was expelled from the party in 2020 for criticizing Xi. "Before there was still resistance, but this time you can see that China's future is entirely driven by Xi's will."

When Xi came to power in 2012, he was seen as a low-key pragmatist that some hoped would be a reformer in the vein

of Mikhail Gorbachev or at least of his own father, a revolutionary leader who helped implement economic liberalization under Deng Xiaoping.

But he moved decisively in the other direction. He called Gorbachev a coward and ordered cadres to study the fall of the Soviet Union. The party expanded the surveillance state and oversaw a campaign of mass detention in Xinjiang that the United Nations said may constitute crimes against humanity. Authorities cracked down on Chinese civil society while lawmakers imposed a draconian national security in Hong Kong to stop anti-Beijing protests.

He declared a “no limits” partnership with Russian president Vladimir Putin just before the Kremlin invaded Ukraine in February. Under a banner of nationalism promoted by Xi, an army of “wolf warriors” appears increasingly willing to flout diplomatic norms to appear more patriotic at home.

As paramount leader who demands absolute loyalty, Xi also undermined a system of collective rule as well as power sharing among factions within the party — a system honed since the 1980s to ward off personality cults.

“He will have his third term as a very strong leader. He consolidated power and placed his own people in the standing committee,” said Yang Zhang, assistant professor at the School of International Service at American University.

By stacking the standing committee, Xi is undoing an age norm held since the 1990s. Then-party leader Jiang Zemin used an informal cutoff of 68 to force out older leaders and promote replacements. For the next three decades, that trigger drove turnover at the top of the party. No more.

Two 67-year-old standing committee members retired, including former premier Li Keqiang, a one-time contender for the top party job and a protege of Xi’s predecessor Hu Jintao. (Hu himself was unceremoniously escorted offstage in the middle of congress’s final session Saturday. State media said he was feeling unwell.)

Some observers expected Xi would give at least one slot on the standing committee to a politician from outside his clique in a nod to power sharing.

But on Sunday, all additional slots were filled exclusively with Xi’s men and the premiership is expected to go to Li Qiang, former Shanghai party chief and a close ally of Xi. Hu Chunhua, once an up-and-comer talked about as potentially next-in-line for the top job, did not even make the 24-member Politburo.

Li Qiang oversaw a disastrous two-month lockdown of Shanghai that left residents without enough food or supplies and inspired a wave of public anger over the government’s insistence on a “zero covid” policy. Still, the measures were praised by the central leadership.

“Xi is also sending a signal that if you want to get promoted, it’s not about popularity among the people. It’s about loyalty to me,” Zhang, the academic, said of Li Qiang’s appointment.

Xi is expected to ramp up his ambitions in his third term, focusing especially on national security, upgrading the country’s technology sector and challenging an international order dominated by the United States.

It won’t be easy. He must navigate a slowdown in the Chinese economy, rising unemployment and a worsening

property market — all exacerbated by sudden lockdowns and persistent outbreaks of the Omicron variant to which swaths of public are especially vulnerable.

China's relationship with the United States is set to grow more combative. With the departure from top leadership of economic czar Liu He and the former party secretary of Guangdong province, Wang Yang — who were seen as helping smooth relations with the United States — Xi will likely adopt a more hardline approach toward Washington.

The party must be committed to “self-revolution” in order to become “all-conquering,” Xi said on Sunday. During his speech at the opening of last week's congress, Xi warned that the party must gird itself against efforts to “blackmail” his country.

China also is expected to turn increasingly inward as Beijing renegotiates its relationship with the West.

“Xi Jinping has emphatically set the Chinese economy on a path toward realizing his vision of a state-dominated and self-reliant economy that will continue engaging with the rest of the world but entirely on its own terms,” said Eswar Prasad, a professor of economics at Cornell University.

Yet Xi will encounter risks in his third term, from divisions within his own coterie of allies to the dangers of over-centralized power.

“When all the power is one person's hands, all of the responsibility must be borne by that person,” said Cai, the former professor. “If he makes disastrous mistakes, it is not just 1.4 billion people bearing the consequences of this disaster. This person himself will also have to pay a price.”

*Pei-Lin Wu in Taipei contributed to this report.*