

# CPC Futures

*The New Era of  
Socialism with  
Chinese Characteristics*

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## **The CPC as a Global Force: A Long-Term View**

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As Chinese leaders do, Xi Jinping has set targets for his country and the ruling communist party to reach, the most important being in the year 2049. To coincide with the centenary of the success of the revolution that brought the Communist Party of China (CPC) to power, Xi says China in 2049 should be a “strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and modern socialist country” (Bandurski 2021).

Some of those terms need to be translated for western audiences. “Democratic” and “harmonious” taken together are code for a united country under the leadership of a single party. “Socialist” means that the state will remain central to the economy.

All of that is true today, as far as it goes. But to give Xi’s ambitions their proper geo-political dimension, the aim is to make China the largest and most powerful country in the world by 2049, standing alongside the U.S. globally, but above it in the region.

Essential to this vision is Taiwan, which must be formally brought under Beijing’s rule by then, if not earlier. China should have prevailed in its expansive claims in the South China and East China Seas. Every country in the region will have learnt both to internalise Beijing’s priorities and to respect them.

Without these benchmarks being met, Xi’s “China Dream” would have become something more akin to a national nightmare.

The China Dream and its ultimate target date, though, involve more than raw power and territorial settlements. In Xi’s vision, it also involves the transformation of the ruling party into the kind of governing vehicle that can meet these targets.

It is no coincidence that Xi's multi-volume collection of speeches and articles is called *The Governance of China* (Xi 2017, 2018, 2020). Xi aims to transform the Party into something which has the capacity and legitimacy to successfully execute the historic mission he has set for it.

Put another way, the Party should be a smooth-running machine, run by upright officials who are simultaneously capable technocrats, ideologically loyal and selfless in the service of the mission.

How does Xi's vision of the Party match that of his most prominent predecessors, Mao Zedong, who led the 1949 revolution, and Deng Xiaoping, who kick-started China's economic take-off thirty years later? In other words, is there a continuum from the revolution in 1949 to Xi's dream in the current day and beyond?

To answer that question requires an overview not just of Chinese politics, but also of its relations with the rest of the world, especially the U.S.

The Party has evolved in its 70 years in power from a revolutionary party to a governing one. Under Xi, it is undergoing a fresh, and, for the rest of the world, a far more important transition. Not only will the CPC be a governing party at home. China's superpower status and expansion of its interests and influence around the world mean that it will be a global party as well (see also the chapter by Pieke in this volume).

Such a transition will be felt on two fronts. Over time, as its economy continues to develop and its military power expands, Beijing will expect to be much more of a rule-setter than a rule-taker in the global order.

In Xi's own words, the task of the Party and its leaders is to "lay the foundation for a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position" (Clarke 2020). That does not mean that China will try to export its own model to other countries. Much sloppy analysis which asserts that Beijing is "exporting its model" misses the point (Young 2021). Even well-credentialed analysts like Elizabeth Economy argue this case, by listing various aspects of its system that Chinese officials are promoting around the world (Economy 2019).

But the China model, which combines a centuries-old bureaucratic culture with a Leninist structure imported from the Soviet Union, is neither replicable elsewhere, nor fit for purpose in other countries.

Beijing is self-aware enough to know that other countries cannot structure their governments along the exact same lines as its own. In other words, the China Dream does not anticipate other countries remoulding their systems in the image of the CPC.

But if China cannot export its model lock, stock and barrel, it is already exporting segments of it in ways that will extend its influence, in both governance

and tech standards. With the CPC in charge, the world will not simply look more like China. China will want to change the international environment to serve its own interests and purposes rather than those of the U.S. and other Western powers.

That means that China will set and export technological standards, political values and the rules that go with them. Over time, China will talk less about the benefits of the current rules-based order, and more about its own rules. That by itself, will mark a seismic shift in the global order.

That process—of the Party “going global”—is already well underway. China has long been pressing its case in United Nations forums, initially quietly and now with more confidence, for a new way of looking at the concept of universal human rights.

The Western concept focuses on political values and rights. China, in line with its own domestic politics, insists that this is too narrow and that human rights norms should be focused on economic outcomes, material well-being and the inviolability of national sovereignty.

If the Chinese political system, or at least elements of it, is going global, that naturally accentuates conflict with the U.S. The contest between Washington and Beijing is already multifaceted. They are competing on trade, on the economy and technology. They are competing militarily in the Asian region. Increasingly, as the CPC's global reach and influence grow, the contest is pitting the two countries' political systems against each other.

Through U.S. eyes, this is a contest that Washington is just waking up to.

It is not so much that a clash between the U.S. and China was always inevitable, although that is probably true, given their size and their conflicting spheres of influence. More to the point, the question being asked in Washington is whether Beijing has been tailoring its diplomacy in preparation to take on the U.S. all along. In Deng's much cited and famous phrase, was China “hiding its light and biding its time” until it was powerful enough to confront the U.S. head-on?

One can take this line of argument back even further, to 1949, and ask the same question, whether the character of CPC is essentially unchanging. In other words, are the values and aims of the revolutionary party in 1949 much the same as those designed for the global party in 2049?

Increasingly, the prevailing sentiment inside the U.S. system is that Chinese statecraft has been up until now a kind of shell game, concealing its greater long-term ambitions until it was in a powerful enough position to realise them.

To quote the title of Rush Doshi's 2021 book, Beijing was playing “the long game”, retreating tactically in the face of superior U.S. firepower, and advancing

later with confidence and near impunity as it felt its national strength nearing par with its rival.

Doshi's analysis has resonance beyond the academy these days. Once a scholar at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, Doshi now sits in Joe Biden's National Security Council, advising on China. His book divides China's grand strategy since Reform and Opening into three distinct eras, starting respectively in 1989, 2008 and 2016.

The late 1980s and the early 1990s were marked by U.S. strength and internal turmoil in China, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War. Unable to match the U.S., Beijing's aim was to blunt Washington's influence and standing at home and in the region.

After the 2008 financial crisis, Beijing judged that the U.S. was weakening and began to challenge it. With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, followed by the rolling chaos of his administration, COVID and the 2020 presidential election, Beijing shifted into a decisive new phase for the coming decades, convinced that the U.S. was in irretrievable decline.

Around 2016, Beijing started talking about "great changes unseen in a century", just as the West was weakening. The phrase is laden with vengeful irony in China, echoing the lament of Chinese leaders in the late 19th century when they were being forced to cede sovereignty to Western nations. At the time, they complained that the world was undergoing "great changes... not seen in 3,000 years".

Doshi makes his case well, backing his analysis with a forensic reading of Chinese-language official documents and commentaries over decades. Whether one subscribes to it or not, the analysis seems broadly reflected in current-day U.S. policymaking circles. Far from U.S. and China relations offering "win-win" outcomes, as Beijing has long said, the Washington consensus by and large believes that the CPC is playing a zero-sum game, aiming to supplant U.S. power in Asia, and perhaps even globally.

In the wake of Joe Biden's 2020 election victory, the two countries have displayed signs of co-operation, for instance on climate change. But the relationship is more typified by ongoing adversarial competition developing into that between competing systems, giving the rivalry an ideological dimension that sits in tension alongside a massive two-way trade relationship.

The ideological divide was there from the start of the revolution. The U.S. was anti-communist, while "Red" China was anti-capitalist. China and the U.S. were divided along Cold War lines until 1971, when the Sino-Soviet split offered the two countries a chance to talk.

The ideological catfights were muted during the early years of Reform and Opening in the 1980s but began to regain clarity after the 1989 military crackdown on protesters in Beijing and other cities.

Deng reintroduced a tighter political line. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, who followed him as the country's top leaders, never really stepped back from this position, even as they experimented with economic reform and repositioning China around the world.

Xi, by contrast, has been much more open and explicit about the ideological gulf and the inevitable competition that comes with it. It is no coincidence that one of the most popular catch phrases in Beijing in 2022 has deep historical resonance: "The East is rising; The West is declining".

Yang Jiechi, Beijing's top diplomat and a Politburo member, set the tone for the ideological dimension of the China Dream at his first meeting with senior members of the Biden administration in Alaska, in March 2021.

On the Chinese internet, the sharpest parts of the lengthy and now infamous diatribe delivered by Yang, directed across the table at Anthony Blinken, the Secretary of State, and Jake Sullivan, the National Security Adviser, went viral. In China, street vendors drummed up a brisk trade almost overnight in selling T-shirts and tea mugs adorned with his words, about how America should "stop interfering in China's internal affairs" and so forth.

But the substance in Yang's exposition lay elsewhere, and was not destined to gain transitory fame as a meme. Unprompted by his American interlocutors, Yang enunciated how Beijing believed the world should be ordered, and how its viewpoint differed from that of the United States.

China's focus, Yang said, was on what he called the United Nations-centred international system, underpinned by international law. The "so-called rules-based order" led by the U.S., by contrast, he said, was only followed by a "small number of countries".<sup>1</sup>

China's objections to the "so-called rules-based order" run wide and deep, and across institutions and continents, but they can also be summed up simply. China believes that the rules-based system was established by the U.S. for the ultimate benefit of the U.S. and its allies.

Once that it understood, it is not hard to see how Beijing has concluded that the global system must be modified to suit its interests. Lacking such modification, the system could work against China and corrode Beijing's grip on power at home.

Beijing's prime target is not global trade rules, governed by the World Trade Organization. China benefits from an open trading system and has been a prolific dealmaker in bi-lateral and multilateral forums. Rather, Beijing is focused on

geo-economic objectives, such as gaining the high ground on tech issues. That would allow it to reap economic benefits and offer other states the benefits of its surveillance state.

Neutralising external threats to the Party's internal rule is also important. Xi has now almost completed the transition of the CPC into a global party. Outwardly, he and other senior leaders project an air of confidence that the ruling party's ascent is an unstoppable historical phenomenon.

At least, that's the theory. In practice, Xi Jinping's dream of a ruling party that has a dominant presence around the world is yet to be tested, let alone realised.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Beijing has a habit of attaching the adjective "so-called" to a concept or idea when it aims to denigrate it. Its spokesmen often refer to America's "so-called" democracy; they call the four-country grouping of the U.S., Japan, India and Australia the "so-called Quad"; and they disparage western efforts to investigate human rights atrocities in Xinjiang by referring to the "so-called Uyghur tribunal".

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