

Op-Ed: The CPC at its 19th National Congress

By Robert Lawrence Kuhn (People's Daily Online) 13:22, October 12, 2017



Photo taken on Oct. 1, 2017 shows flower parterres in Beijing, capital of China.

With the ascendancy of China recognized by all, though worrying to some, foreign analysts and media look to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China for clues about China's future. It is no secret that President Xi Jinping, during his almost five years as China's senior-most leader, has strengthened the Party's role in governing China — and foreigners have questions. I'm asked these questions by foreign media and I think it is useful to state and examine them.

What is it about the Party, the CPC, and its governing philosophy, that makes Xi so committed to enhancing the Party's governing power? What are the Party's positions and policies, organization and governance, vision and challenges? Why has China opted for perpetual CPC leadership? Would China be more stable with a competitive multi-party system? How does the CPC as the ruling party claim legitimacy? What innovations has Xi brought to the Party's leadership role in the economy and society? Why has Xi elevated "strict discipline of the Party" to the highest level of national importance, the fourth of his "Four Comprehensives" for governing China? Why is his anti-corruption campaign so relentless?

Answers to these questions lead to a more basic question: How has the Party led China to its remarkable development and modernization? How has the Party adapted to changing conditions, kept up with the times? What can we learn from the Party's history, its triumphs and tragedies? What is it about the Party's recent past that it must now be rejuvenated?

But can a system with a perpetually ruling party discipline itself, itself establish credible checks-and-balances? Is transparency the Party's foe or friend? What challenges does the Party face? What does the Party consider its greatest dangers? And what are its enduring ideals, its visions for the future? Under Xi's core leadership, how might the Party's role in governing China develop over the next five or ten years?

China requires strong leadership to maintain stability given China's unique, complex challenges: domestically (slower growth, industrial overcapacity, endemic pollution, imbalanced development, income disparity, social injustice, social service demands) and internationally (regional conflicts, sluggish economies, volatile markets, trade protectionism, ethnic clashes, terrorism, geopolitical rivalries, territorial disputes).

The augmented role of the Party in governing commercial corporations — private and even foreign companies, not only state-owned enterprises — exemplifies Xi's determination to strengthen the Party's leadership of the country. Xi's unprecedented anti-corruption campaign has won strong public support. His determination to root-out corruption and cut the wasteful and detested perks of officialdom is altering how officials in government, and executives in state-owned enterprises, work and even think.

But some foreign analysts see Xi's anti-corruption campaign as a weapon of political power, thus reflecting their superficial and one-dimensional understanding of China. Befitting the size and complexity of the country, for almost every decision of importance, China's leaders have multiple motivations or reasons.

For the anti-corruption campaign, I can see ten motivations or reasons.

First, to state the obvious, officials who are manifestly corrupt are brought to justice. To manage China's huge society, there must be respect for law and judicial impartiality.

Second, by combatting corruption the Party increases public trust, building confidence in the Party's leadership.

Third, by combatting corruption the Party functions more effectively and efficiently, making decisions for the general good, not biased by personal benefits.

Fourth, corruption distorts markets, so that by reducing corruption, resources are allocated more efficiently.

Fifth, corrupt officials impede economic reform because change threatens their private interests. The removal of corrupt officials facilitates reform.

Sixth, corrupt officials thwart rule of law for personal interests and prosecuting them strengthens rule of law for the national interest. Rule of law is exceedingly important, the third of Xi's "Four Comprehensives."

Seventh, some corrupt officials, in addition to enriching themselves, have non-standard political ambitions that could destabilize the system; their removal helps maintain national unity and political stability, which is essential for China.

Eighth, for China to become a world business center, China must have world-class business ethics and standards.

Ninth, combatting corruption benefits China's entire society, elevating morality and restoring Chinese civilization as a paragon of ethics and integrity.

Tenth, for China to become a global role model, China must exemplify morality and rectitude.



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The CPC is a work in process. For the world to understand China, it must understand why the Party asserts that its continuing political leadership is optimum for China's development. One key is the Party's adaptability, stressing experimentation and testing of new policies.

All systems of governance have trade-offs. The benefits of a system with a single leading party include implementing critical policies rapidly and assuring that strategies which require long-term commitment, have long-term commitment - for example, China's Belt and Road Initiative. The costs or dangers of a system with a single leading party is that society is much more dependent on the quality of its leaders, and much more vulnerable to their vicissitudes and excesses. There are trade-offs too in stricter public regulations, including media.

The Party's leadership is deemed essential for China to continue its current development. Yet to continue to earn its leadership, the Party has a higher obligation to enhance rectitude of governance, standards of living and personal well-being — which includes rule of law, transparency in government, public oversight, institutionalized checks and balances, increasing democracy, various freedoms, and human rights.

Going forward in the "new era", the Party faces challenges - furthering economic reform and transformation, and guiding social development and transition - while at the same time, improving transparency and building institutions that are self-regulating. The Party claims a historic mission. The Party will continue to be judged by the results.

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