

Xi Jinping - China's "new normal" leader



By Invitation

In the future, Insightperspectives will regularly invite experts to write on "special" issues of importance to the financial market. In this context, **Joergen Delman**, professor, PhD, China Studies, Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, was invited to make his assessment of China's president Xi Jinping and the main drivers behind his policy approach. In the last decade, the editor of this newsletter has benefited strongly from Mr. Delman's in-depth knowledge of China.

Joergen Delman works on China's political economy, politics, civil society, climate policies and environmental issues. He is a frequent public speaker and media commentator on these topics and has lived and worked as a consultant for international development organisations, as well as Danish and international businesses, in China for 10 years. He has worked extensively with and within Chinese government organisations at central and local level. Jørgen Delman is Co-coordinator of ThinkChina.dk.

The [Communist Party of China](#) (CPC) is the world's largest political party with more than 80 million members. It has been in power for 65 years and has been successful in turning the fate of China. Yet, many of its top leaders believe that it is facing a severe crisis due to its embrace of corruption and since many of its leaders have [lost sight of its fundamental social](#)

obligations in their pursuit of personal privilege and wealth.

The incumbent leader of the CPC, **Xi Jinping**, has shown determination to swing the whip over the ailing Party from the time he rose to power in 2012. He has first-rate political credentials to do so. His father, **Xi Zhongxun** was a first-generation communist guerrilla leader who made it to the top under the People's Republic of China. He was persecuted as head of an anti-Party clique from the early 1960es and stigmatized throughout the Cultural Revolution. He returned to the political scene as one of Deng Xiaoping's close allies in 1978 and was appointed Party leader in Guangdong in South China. With the endorsement of Deng, he became the father and founder of one of the most successful engines of China's modern growth miracle, the **Shenzhen Special Economic Zone**.

Xi senior did not only win respect for his political accomplishments, he also built strong personal networks. By virtue of his parentage, Xi Junior is a so-called "**princeling**", a child of a first-generation revolutionary leader. He has been cautiously supported by his father's networks which are likely to include some of the most influential political groupings in China, although this is hard to determine due to the

secrecy surrounding the personal affairs of China's political elite. Xi junior also learned from his father's agile and consensus oriented politics and he was equipped at home with the essentials of the moral compass he is steering by.



Like his father, Xi Jinping has had a career that has groomed him as a potential top leader. As a young man, Xi went to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and became a grassroots leader. Even if he went to a place where he was protected by his father's network **from the time of the guerrilla war**, the experience was a rite of passage for him. Since then he has been around government and party posts at all administrative levels. In ascending order, the **most important ones** were in Fujian, Zhejiang and Shanghai

where he held government and party leadership posts. Throughout, Xi built [his own personal network](#).



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Still, his background and track record are not different from many of his “princeling” and other peers since all top leaders must have experiences as government and party leaders at lower levels. The philosophy is that they need to be familiar with the daily concerns of ordinary people and the challenges that the party-state faces locally. During his career, Xi has also earned useful credits for stints of service within the military, and he took a PhD degree in Law at Tsinghua University

in 2002. All of this made him a highly electable candidate for his top jobs.

Cleaning the Party - a matter of life and death

While some observers in China argue that the Party’s maladies are endemic, Xi believes that only the CPC can govern itself and China. But he demands that the Party must return to its roots when it comes to its working style. Leaders and members must show personal commitment to the Party’s cause and abide by Party discipline. They must work hard, practise thrift, be incorruptible, and they must have clean personal records and align with the people’s concerns through the mass line.

Xi is no coward. His anti-corruption campaign does not shy away from taking out so-called “big tigers”, i.e. top leaders at central and provincial level and nobody can feel safe anymore or anywhere in the vast party-state system, at least not for now. Xi sees the campaign as a matter of life and death for the Party, as well as for himself.

Still, it is run as a traditional campaign, and while it may scare people and possibly induce some to change their behaviour, experience has shown that campaigns will not fix the problem on their own. Corrupt behaviour

can only be mitigated through independent constitutional checks and balances. It has indeed been announced that concomitant legal reforms will be forthcoming at the next plenary meeting of the Party's Central Committee in October this year; but judging from the announcement, the status of the Communist Party as a supra-legal organization will not be changed.

Finally, the number of people taken so far for corruption at the highest levels, where corruption is the worst, is still fairly small. Many people will manage to steer under the radar, and eventually there must be limits to how many corrupt leaders Xi and his allies can tackle without disturbing the internal balance of the alliance of influential political groupings that brought him to power.

Containing Western influences

Xi also calls for a stricter ideological line focusing on support for the Party, and dissidents and rights proponents have had a rough time in recent months. Furthermore, he criticizes the influence of Western liberal thinking. He [disclaims the value of liberal democracy](#) with competing political parties and sees it as a recipe for political gridlock, weakening of the political system and eventually its demise. Instead, he

advocates continued party leadership and top-down democratic centralism, principles that have guided the CPC since 1921 and the system of government since 1949. Recently, a campaign against Western liberal ideas hit China's universities and research academies, and some of the major universities were quick to make promises to strengthen their ideological education of staff and students. Effectively, the Party aims to be reasserting its control over academic institutions.

A new fifth modernization

While political reforms are a no-go area, Xi has announced that a new "fifth modernization" will address China's system of governance. This is significant since Deng Xiaoping and before him Zhou Enlai declared the "four modernizations" of agriculture, industry, military, and science and technology the basic prescription for China's modernization. Governance and legal reforms make perfect sense within Xi Jinping's frame of understanding since they will not rock the power monopoly of the CPC. However, it is ironic, yet hardly unintended, that Xi borrowed the "fifth modernization" concept from an iconic dissident, [Wei Jingsheng](#), who was active in a democracy movement in the late 1970es. Wei argued that modernization was impossible without democracy.

Xi's "new normal" and the reform motor

Even without political reforms, China's reform motor is still running at high volume. The CPC announced its most comprehensive reform program since 1978 in November last year. The main focus is on better management of the relationship between the government and the market so that the market can play a decisive role in the economy. Yet, economic growth is slowing down. In response, Xi argues that China is ready to move beyond investment driven growth and has to accept lower growth rates. He calls this the "new normal". While the reform package is gradually being rolled out, Xi has also drawn attention to more populist policies, such as an announcement that he would reduce the remuneration levels of leaders of state-owned enterprises and the perks of people in high public office to tackle perceived social inequalities.

A stronger international player – especially in Asia

Xi has proven to be quite assertive internationally in recognition of China's new role as a great power and China has engaged its neighbours more aggressively in conflicts over contested territories. Xi probably wants

to mark China's well-known territorial claims more emphatically while also testing the commitment of the US towards its allies and partners in the region. While no conflict has broken out yet, Xi will likely continue the [push to make China a more influential regional power in East and South East Asia](#) while carefully avoiding to antagonize the US at this stage.

China also benefits from stronger relations to Putin's Russia. At a time when Russia is involved in the conflict in Ukraine, Russia is interested in moving away from Europe and tapping into China's expanding market for natural gas. In addition, Xi continues the efforts of his predecessors to build stronger relations with African countries and China also engages in more international peace operations.

Xi's new normal leadership - true to the ideals of the CPC

Since coming into power, Xi has chosen an assertive stance as a tough leader focusing on a stronger party, more ideological uniformity, anti-corruption, continued reforms, and a more aggressive foreign policy. He has also taken on more key leadership positions on the national security commission and on important leading groups that deal with economic reform and internet

security. Furthermore, he is the only authoritative voice within the new leadership. None of his associates in the top leadership have gone public with their ideas and appear to be satisfied with being his loyal executives.

The propaganda departments are obviously thrilled that they may eventually have to promote Xi as a worthy successor to Mao and Deng. They certainly possess all the traditional tools in the propaganda toolbox to do so and some are already in use. But it is too early to say whether this will actually happen and [we cannot be sure that Xi harnesses such ambition](#) and even more whether his colleagues and allies will allow it.

There is international speculation that Xi could be a radical reformer in disguise. He first needs to clean the plate, runs the argument, and then he will show his true colours! However, there is no evidence to support such speculations. Rather, Xi is true to the ideals of the CPC and believes in comprehensive Party leadership. His ambition is rather to be a new normal leader. Like his predecessors he wants to champion economic reform while burying ideas about political reform. The bottom line is that he is just more ambitious, more assertive, more willing to take political risks, and harder hitting than his immediate predecessors. However, if he

trespasses, his opponents may wish to constrain him and argue that they do it for the sake of the survival of the Party and the country. The Party will win either way.

In a follow up to this article, Joergen Delman will make a political risk analysis of the Xi leadership following the fourth plenary session of the Central Committee at the 18th CPC Congress. The meeting will be held in October and will debate legal and administrative reform, Party building, the Party's ideological orientation, as well as the ongoing anti-corruption campaign, not least the fate of former top leader Zhou Yongkang.

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