



The “New” And “Old” In Xi Jinping As a Chinese Leader

Event Summary

Thursday, May 18, 2023

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) hosted the 15th edition of its Foreign Policy and Security Tiffin Talk series with **Prof. Joseph Torigian**, Assistant Professor, School of International Service, American University.
- The discussion focussed on the nature of power and ideology in Chinese politics and foreign policy historically, their roles in characterizing the leadership of the current Chinese President Xi Jinping, and implications of China’s domestic politics and leadership for the future of India-China relations.
- The discussants at the seminar included **Amb. Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP, and former National Security Advisor of India, and **Mr. Jayadeva Ranade**, Member, National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) and former Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India.
- The discussion was moderated by **Ms. Riya Sinha**, Associate Fellow, CSEP. Participants included representatives from the government of India, former diplomats, scholars and researchers from leading think tanks and universities from India and abroad.
- CSEP’s Tiffin Talk Series features scholars presenting their recent evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This series of closed-door seminars seeks to facilitate dialogue between researchers and policy-makers invested in India’s foreign policy and security affairs.

Nature and continuity of power and leadership in Chinese politics

The first and perhaps most important theme that emerged from the presentation and discussion was that of the universality and continuity in the nature of political power in China. Given the global image of Xi Jinping as a somewhat mysterious leader that even famed journalists and political analysts find difficult to predict or characterize, this was an important deduction from the discussion.

Understanding Chinese politics, particularly under Xi Jinping, is hard for outsiders. However, history provides a useful context about how Leninist parties generally work and where Xi fits in. To demonstrate how the country has an extraordinarily leader-friendly system under the Communist Party of China (CPC), Prof. Torigian

explored the country’s elite power politics under two Chinese leaders, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. First was Mao’s image as a revolutionary modernizer and his relationship with Liu Shaoqi, the pragmatic bureaucrat. Despite a common understanding that Liu challenged Mao at the 1962 Seven Thousand Cadre Conference, that is not how the system has worked traditionally, and, in fact, Mao had himself realized the need for self-criticism and rectification by then, claimed Prof. Torigian.

More central to the discussion was Deng Xiaoping and his leadership, a model that Xi is commonly known to reject. Deng was popularly seen as an “institutionalizer”, who cared about collective leadership and placed checks and balances to prevent a new “Mao”, whereas Xi is often viewed as rejecting this model of pragmatism and institutional decision-making. Prof. Torigian argued that there is continuity in the nature of elite power politics in

China. Even during the 1980s, Deng was the core leader, who could make up his mind whenever and however he wanted to. Some examples that he shared in this regard include Deng's unilateral decision-making to engineer the 1978 war in Vietnam, the 1988 price reform, the 1989 violent crackdown, the 1992 Southern Tour, and Deng's own admission that China, with one person as a central decision-maker, was better than the US that has "three governments". These instances demonstrate Deng's belief that a core leader was an inherent strength of the Chinese system. However, Deng wanted to give an impression of inner-party democracy and therefore, ruled from behind the curtain. Xi's story of elite power, therefore, is that of continuity rather than change.

The participants resonated with this observation. However, a discussant pointed out that, unlike Mao who hated bureaucracy, Xi shows "statist" characteristics. Another discussant talked about Xi's aggressive shake up of all pillars of the party, including the People's Liberation Army (PLA), where Xi installed his loyalists, bringing it under his control. On the account of civil-military relations, one speaker shared an interesting observation about how, despite playing the central role in restoring the country's order from most crises, the army always goes back to the barracks afterwards. This pattern shows that the civil and military institutions in China do not work as separate entities but are deeply entrenched.

Xi Jinping and ideology

The second theme of the discussion was ideology, with a focus on Xi Jinping. Prof. Torigian discussed the historical context and Xi's experiences, including his exile to the countryside at a young age and his father's removal from the party. These experiences shaped Xi's worldview and ideological leaning as an idealist yet a pragmatic leader. The speaker noted that his approaches to core leadership, party structure, and discipline make Xi "a textbook Leninist". However, he is also Maoist, with a crucial caveat that there were multiple versions of Mao, and Xi has been critical of his radical policies, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Despite his caution against dogma, participants noted that Xi emphasizes on faith, ideals, and devotion to the party's mission, and places a great deal of importance on its history. He also attributes the fall of

the Soviet Union to the loss of its control over its history, which is why he essentially feeds a sanitized version of the CPC's history to the Chinese public.

A discussant shared that the role of the leader in the Chinese system has consistently been underestimated by the west. Whether ambiguity is China's deliberate policy is unclear, but the effect of China's elite politics and Xi's personality on war and peace require serious examination.

Implications for India-China relations

Although most participants agreed that there is little to no power struggle within the CPC or the military, they noted several challenges that the party faces. Some of them included politically destabilizing issues such as property tax, Zero Covid policy and opening up, concern over Xi's successor, and "broken feedback mechanism" in Chinese elite politics. Regarding Xi's successor, Prof. Torigian argued that not only is it difficult to find a replacement with the right personality and political skills but picking one would immediately mean that Xi is no longer the core leader. Despite these challenges, however, the discussants noted that Xi has not gone through a major stress test yet, as Deng and Mao did. One of them pointed out two major mistakes Xi has made, which can have important implications for the country, region, and the world. First was China's decision to send its army to Ladakh, which was "a strategic mistake". And the second has been its aggressive foreign policy and confrontation with the west, which is likely to make China "friendless". He also cited China's history to argue that the possibility of an inner-party struggle to challenge the leadership cannot be discarded if the stakes get higher.

While Prof. Torigian discussed Xi's lack of "revolutionary prestige" as one of his weaknesses, he dismissed an anti-Xi coup as an immediate possibility. To some extent, Xi's propaganda apparatus has worked to spread a narrative that Xi is the leader who knows what is best for the country and has the capacity to deliver what China really needs. Irrespective of Xi's vision for what China needs, as the participants agreed, Xi's approach and actions have important implications for the region and the world.

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

*This event summary was prepared by **Mahesh K. Kushwaha**, Research Intern, CSEP. For queries, please reach out to **Nitika Nayar**, Research Analyst CSEP, at NNayar@csep.org.*

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