

China's People's Congress Moves To Implement New Era Policies

by William Jones

March 25—The annual meeting of China's two law-making bodies, the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), garnered more international attention than usual this year. What grabbed the most media notice was the decision by the NPC, China's legislature, to eliminate the two-term limits for the country's President and Vice President. This means effectively that China's President Xi Jinping can again serve as president after the end of his present term in 2022. There was a good deal of speculation as to why this was done; most of the Western media characteristically attributed it to sinister motives.

But what was more significant about the "Two Sessions," as these two annual meetings are called, was the consolidation of the new policy that had been clearly formulated at last year's 19th Communist Party Congress, which called for a new direction in China's development policy and a new and formative role for China in the international arena, policies which have been developed under the aegis of Xi Jinping.

China's Reform and Deng's Caveat

The world has been amazed at the rapidity with which China has developed during the last 40 years since Deng Xiaoping launched his "reform and opening up" in 1978, which helped pull China out of the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, in which the intellectual and professional elite of China had been decimated.

Deng's leadership helped restore sanity to Chinese



A press conference on poverty alleviation at the 13th National People's Congress on March 7, 2018.

policy, and began an era of opening up to the outside world which provided the momentum for rebuilding Chinese society. But a subsidiary aspect of Deng's policy was a caveat not to "make waves" internationally. "Hide your strength and bide your time" was how he put it. China, Deng said, should proceed to quietly build up the scientific and intellectual capabilities which would allow it to eventually emerge from its "entry level" into the world economy as a low-wage producer for the Western economies, and to go on to transform itself into a modern and "moderately prosperous society."

Some among the Chinese elites, fueled by the exaggerated wishes of some Western political circles, believed that China would "morph" into a placid, and totally subordinate, member of the Western "international order" In fact, during the 1980s, when China was trying to acclimatize itself to the Western system, they would invite leading intellectuals from the West and from Eastern Europe (which had developed its own form of



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Deputy Premier of China Deng Xiaoping, being briefed by Christopher Kraft, the director of the Johnson Space Center.

“goulash Communism”), to advise them on how to reform the Chinese system in order to better comply with the rules of Western-style “capitalism.”

Needless to say, not all Chinese leaders were happy with such a direction. After all, the Communist Party was supposed to be devoted to the interests of the workers and peasants, not to the wishes of a growing middle class which had succeeded in working its way out of poverty. But the extraordinary economic successes resulting from the policy of adaptation served to quiet any dissent along these lines.

The first shock to this outlook came with the demise of the Soviet Union. The Soviets had also “opened up” their economies to Western capitalism. They had privatized their industries and allowed the untrammled entry of Western capitalists into their midst. But it had brought down the entire structure and crushed Russia. But even more, it was the major global financial crisis of 2008 which really made it clear to Chinese leaders that this system was seriously flawed, and would not lead to a successful outcome for China as it became more and more integrated into that system. There had to be a new direction and China had to find out what it was.

Charting a New Path for China

By 2013, it was becoming clear which road China had to take. The announcement of the Silk Road Economic Belt by President Xi Jinping in September 2013 in Astana, Kazakhstan, was the launching of a new economic policy, based on the willingness of China to make major infrastructure investments abroad intended to foster growth and development. The investments initially focused on China’s immediate neighbors in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, but quickly spread beyond the immediate neighborhood to a large part of the developing world. And China’s continued identification with, and sympathy for the other developing countries, created a keen sense of solidarity with the plight of these nations.

With its Belt and Road Initiative, China stepped out onto the world stage in a big way. On the one hand, it raised the profile of China as a major power pursuing an independent policy. The policy was greeted enthusiastically by most developing countries, who now saw a possible way out of the continual cycle of poverty and crisis, and even by many of the developed countries, which saw in it a means of reviving their own faltering economies. Many among the Western elites, however, viewed the Belt and Road as a threat to a system in which *they* set the rules.

And while China was prepared to take its place as a responsible party in the post-World War II international institutions, upholding the rules of the UN, the WTO, and other international organizations, it nevertheless felt that its ideas about development through increased participation with Western institutions, and infrastructural development, were far superior to the way the world had been operating over the previous two decades. And its clear recognition of the ever-present danger of a blow-out of the bloated international debt system, led it to call for major economic reforms at the international level.

While Xi Jinping’s new orientation no doubt met with some internal opposition from those in China who still felt that China should maintain a low profile, during the course of the last five years President Xi has largely succeeded in overcoming that opposition, and has, in fact, imbued the nation with a new sense of patriotism in support of this new policy. And the new policy also entails, as President Xi has continually pointed out, a

transition from geopolitics, with its cut-throat competition and its zero-sum solutions, to a policy of mutual benefit and the creation of a “community of shared interest for humanity.” He has also been insistent that the developing countries must have a greater say in the shaping of the future of this new community.

At the recent Two Sessions, Xi’s basic concept, under the rubric of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” was overwhelmingly accepted and written into the country’s constitution. It had similarly been written into the Communist Party constitution at the end of last year.

At the same time, there was a clear emphasis at the Two Sessions on the crucial, leading role of the Communist Party of China (PRC). The party has ruled China for almost 70 years (next year will be the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China). Most of what has been accomplished in China since that time has been the result of the work of the ruling party. But readers should be aware that there are other parties in China, as there have been since the founding of the PRC, and many of their members participated in the Two Sessions. President Xi met with their leaders a number of times at the conference to explain the new direction the country was taking, and he urged them to give their full support to the CPC in that effort.

The meeting of the Congress also provided the opportunity to put into leading positions people whom President Xi knew were totally in agreement with this new “going out” perspective. Yet there were still those who feared that China’s heightened international profile might become a target for criticism from the Western countries, particularly from the British and the Americans, but not only them.

There were also elements within the Communist Party that were not entirely favorable to Xi’s leadership. This was particularly the case when he started to move against corruption. When the Chinese economy had begun to grow during the “reform and opening up” period, this growth also provided many people with excellent opportunities to strike it rich—as Deng had somewhat laconically advised them to do—and many



Opening meeting of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, on March 3, 2018.

Xinhua/Li Xueren

did. This bred a good deal of corruption. The campaign Xi launched several years ago against corruption in the government and in the party, targeting both the high and low, both “tigers” and “flies,” was aimed at bringing the party back to its commitment to Sun Yat-Sen’s principle of “the People’s Livelihood.” The anti-corruption campaign had led to imprisonment for many leading officials, no doubt ruffling the feathers of their friends as well.

With a view to preventing further corruption from tarnishing the government and the party, the Congress agreed to set up a Supervisory Commission, which will operate at all government levels: central, provincial, and district, in order to monitor any deviation towards corruption by party or government officials. While much of the corruption has already been eliminated, President Xi is determined that it not again become a problem.

Backed by the new leadership coming out of the recent National People’s Congress, President Xi can be assured that he has the support of the party for moving further in the direction outlined by him in this new era.

Chinese Socialism in the New Era

The ultimate goal, as now outlined in the Constitution by one of the amendments passed by the NPC, is to achieve by 2050 a “great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful.” This phrase was also added to the new oath of office, introduced by Xi and established by the NPC, which every government official must now

take. At his re-election as president, President Xi himself became the first person to take that oath.

And in his final speech to the National People's Congress, President Xi was quite explicit about the orientation required of government and party officials in this People's Republic. "China is a socialist country of people's democratic dictatorship under the leadership of the working class based on an alliance of workers and farmers," Xi told the delegates. "It is a country where all power of the state belongs to the people. We must base our efforts on the interests of the people, ensure the principal status of the people, humbly learn from the people, and heed their needs and draw on their wisdom. . . . We must also ensure that all Chinese people can share the happiness and pride in the historic course of national rejuvenation." The poverty reduction program set into motion by President Xi is a clear example of the direction he intends to move, in orienting government policy toward advancing the welfare of the people.

But, despite China's success in lifting between 700 and 800 million people out of poverty over the last two decades, and launching the most ambitious infrastructure program in the world for dozens of neighboring and distant nations, there is still growing animosity from the British financial "lords of London"—and their faction among their American junior partners—who fear that the growth of China will radically change the world that they have for so long controlled. And they are no doubt correct. Eliminating poverty and centering development on infrastructural investment, have never been strong points of the banking elites, who preferred to clip their coupons of profits squeezed out of the labor of underpaid workers in some of the poorest countries of the world.

The Chinese leadership is fully aware of the threat posed by this international opposition. The "pivot to Asia" of Barack Obama, and the continued efforts by the U.S. Pacific Command to keep the South China Sea from any peaceful resolution of the various existing territorial claims, have clearly reflected the views of the financial elites. And while the election of Donald Trump was generally seen in China as a sign that the United



Department of State/William Ng

President Barack Obama at the East Asia Summit in Cambodia, Nov. 20, 2012.

States might be amenable to integrating China's program into a broader global world, a "community of shared interests," they are also aware that there are forces at work in Washington aiming at sabotaging any such development.

Countering Possible Threats

The measures taken at the People's Congress, including eliminating term limits for the president and vice president, and the strengthening of the role of the Chinese Communist Party, were undertaken to facilitate the achievement of the Two Centenary Goals (poverty elimination by 2020 and a fully developed socialist society by 2050). They are also aimed at strengthening the political structure against any possible attempts at destabilization by hostile Western interests, as was done in Ukraine earlier, which they now see unfolding against Russia, their most important partner in the Belt and Road, and a major country with whom they are in agreement on most overriding international issues.

While President Xi has clearly indicated that the "reform and opening up" will not only continue, but also expand, with more foreign industries being allowed to establish operations in China, with the help of its government—still, necessary precautions will be taken to prevent that "openness" from becoming an entry point for hostile operations.

China is rightly proud of the system that has brought the country to this point. While President Xi has indicated in his comments at the People's Con-



Xinhua

China President Xi Jinping swearing the new oath to the Constitution, March 2018.

gress that China would create “a socialist democracy” as it moves toward its Two Centenary Goals, it will certainly not be some mirror-image of the democratic systems as practiced in the West, systems which have revealed so many serious flaws in the last two decades. The commitment of the Chinese Government and the Chinese Communist Party to the people’s livelihood is more determined than ever under the new leadership. And the fact that President Xi will no doubt be at the rudder of the ship of state even after his present term ends, gives an added degree of stability to that commitment.

President Xi has also broadened the intellectual basis for the development of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” by reviving, as a living tradition, the great thinkers throughout Chinese history, from Confucius and Mencius to the great poets of the Song and Ming dynasties. While this tradition was labeled as “rightist” and suppressed during the disastrous Cultural Revolution, it has always remained a critical element of Chinese thought and practice. And President Xi has, in his own speeches and writings, served to bring these ideas back

into focus for the general public and the intelligentsia, in order to deepen and enhance the traditional thinking within party and government circles. This was also underlined in Xi’s concluding remarks to the People’s Congress, in which he outlined a broad sweep of the achievements of Chinese culture over the last 5,000 years. “The Chinese people are people with great creativity,” Xi told the delegates. “During the thousands of years of history, the Chinese people have always been laboring, innovating, and creating with diligence. Our country has been the birthplace of world-renowned great thinkers. . . . The Chinese people’s magnificent scientific achievements, such as paper-making, gunpowder, printing, and the compass, have profoundly influenced the progress of human civilization,” Xi said.

As China transforms itself into an innovation-based economy—“innovation” and “creativity” being major themes at the Congress—the opening to the outside world is even more important to its own development today. At the same time, conscious of the growing instability in the Western financial markets, the Congress has also taken decisive measures to place oversight of insurance operations and financial operations into a single regulatory body, in order to monitor and control possible “hot money” flows into the country or other financial “machinations” that may threaten the Chinese financial system.

People in the West have got to understand that China will change and develop economically and socially in accordance with the changing needs and desires of the Chinese people, not in accordance with some outside dictate by those who wish to impose any alien template on them. And while other countries will probably not adopt the particular “Chinese model” of governance, (which China has clearly said they are not interested in exporting), there are no doubt lessons to be learned, by developed as well as developing countries, from the success that China has achieved. Perhaps if the Western countries were prepared to accept President Xi’s proposal of building “a community of shared interest,” they would find important elements in Chinese policies which would be beneficial for their own nations. Perhaps we might even hark back to that period in the 17th century which saw the first “opening up” of China to the arriving Jesuit astronomers and philosophers, where the beginnings of a similar, mutually beneficial “dialogue of cultures,” as now lies within our grasp, began to bear fruit, and benefitted, at least for a century or so, both East and West.