

China Blog – December 2021

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Common prosperity has its challenges

The topic of “common prosperity” (see WWR China Blog dated [August 2021](#)) continues to unfold and has the potential to dominate economic and social issues over the next few years. [Observers](#) have pointed out that while many protests may take place in China, it is interesting that Workers’ organizations and unions do not exist, so one important social player present in many other countries will not be able to check achievements and hold the government accountable (Neican, 1 November 2021). Likewise, at least so far, the concept is lacking concrete guidelines and policies, so there is a risk that the implementation will be fragmental and vary from region to region. It does not come as a surprise, then, that President Xi chose Zhejiang province as the pilot region for this policy. Not only was he its party secretary for five years, it is also one of the most prosperous provinces in China.

Another continuing challenge is the ever-dropping [birth rate](#) which has arrived at a mere 8.52 births per 1000 people in 2020, according to the Statistical Yearbook (Channel News Asia, 27 November 2021). All incentives for couples to have more children have failed so far. Even the “[discovery](#)” of up to 12 million hidden children (not registered by their parents as they broke the one-child rule, for example) will not change anything substantial, as this is a one-time effect (Bloomberg, 25 November 2021).

Resolution on history – or on power?

In preparation for the 20th Party Congress in late 2022, the CCP has published a new Resolution on History; this is only the third since the founding of the Communist Party. The first two resolutions stem from 1945 (Mao Zedong) and 1981 (Deng Xiaoping), which shows something of the significance of the new resolution published on 8 November 2021. While on the surface, the resolution is about events in Communist Party history, it is really [all about Communist power](#) and its consolidation (Merics, 10 November 2021).

Observers note a distinct lack of historical details. It is also interesting that it is the [Party taking center stage](#) in the resolution, despite the fact that Xi Jinping is often mentioned (28 times) and state propaganda issued lengthy ‘[hagiographic](#)’ articles in preparation for the resolution’s publication (Xinhua, 6 November 2021). As one observer said: “[The CCP] is literally mentioned in every line on every page”, all in all more than 450 times” (Neican, 8 December 2021). This is an important reminder that although Xi Jinping and his new ideological thrust are both important, it is ultimately the CCP which holds power.

Not directly related, but connected to Xi Jinping's ideological approach, is a [National Conference on Religion](#) which was held in December 2021 after a five year hiatus (Bitter Winter, 8 December 2021). President Xi complained about problems with monitoring the internet and social media to prevent religious propaganda and called the government-controlled religious bodies to develop a "religious theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics". He stressed that "Sinicization" of religion means that all religious communities should be led by the Party, controlled by the Party, and should support the Party.

China on the international stage

The CCP continues trying to bring together an [international alliance](#) of states (Foreign Affairs, 15 November 2021):

- i) to advance progress in alternative definitions of human rights;
- ii) to promote social and economic development, maybe best seen in building infrastructure "without strings attached";
- iii) to make national states the main political actors, not individuals.

The belief that "the East is rising, and the West is declining" is still strong among China's officials and academia, and countries like Tanzania have modelled their cyber-security law with China's assistance. However, China's attempts at forging an international alliance have not been smooth sailing, since challenges have arisen and some states are [re-considering the benefits](#) (Foreign Affairs, 9 December 2021). Nations as far-flung as Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Papua New Guinea and Zambia have seen protests against Chinese-led projects; countries such as Azerbaijan and Mongolia are reporting they have altered their cost-benefit calculations; and other countries have reported corruption-related problems. With a darkening economic outlook, development projects may not flow as freely as before and while the CCP definitely made progress and has something to offer many countries worldwide, it remains to be seen if one observer is right when she states: "Xi may be sacrificing the war to win the battle".

A final word

The three topics discussed above in this China Blog have a common denominator: They all highlight different shades of changes that Xi Jinping's rule has brought about since he took over as Secretary-General of the CCP in 2012. It is a matter of much debate whether his leadership has made China's political system more resilient and enduring – or, on the contrary, has weakened it. This exactly the question examined in a recent [article](#) published in "Third World Quarterly" ("Has Xi Jinping made China's political system more resilient and enduring?", Steven Tsang/Olivia Cheung, Third World Quarterly, 21 November 2021).

The article is worth being read in full and shows that the debate is following a mistaken dichotomy (between regime and modernization theories on the one hand and authoritarian resilience on the other). Here one summary quote:

"Whether the strong hand of the party-state will deliver the same positive outcome when the going gets tough will depend on Xi getting it right. So far, Xi has always doubled down when his authority is being challenged. If the same policymaking pattern

holds, the rigidity of Xi's approach is likely to undermine the resilience of the system when adaptability is needed the most."

So, in the short-term, the system has indeed been made more resilient; the long-term perspectives may look different, however.

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