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The 17th CPC Congress: The Transition that the world Missed

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The 17th Congress of the Communist Party of China has generated numerous speculations about power struggles among party elite. Exclusive attention to power configurations at the top echelon misses the larger picture of how the congress was transforming the party to ultimately become a typical ruling political party. By transforming itself into a conventional ruling party, the CPC shows significant capability to adapt to the socio-economic realities in China. Such transformation may help maintain its ruling position.

THE 17th CONGRESS of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has produced a new line-up of leadership and an amended party constitution. Much attention has been paid to the political power struggles among party elders, incumbent leaders, and the supposedly different factions within the party elite. Little thought, however, has been given to the larger picture of how the congress has transformed the party and the implications of such transformation for the party and China in the future.

What is more important and striking than the reported power struggles is the absence of ideological innovation. In a nutshell, the 17th Congress is essentially a significant step marking the transition of the CPC from a revolutionary party to a typical ruling party in the conventional sense. The old ideological bottle that the congress has expediently tried to showcase no longer contains any new ideological wine. What we can actually smell and taste is essentially timely and desired water for a thirsty society that eagerly, and even desperately, seeks solutions to mounting socio-economic problems.

The Old Bottle Back, but for Other Purposes

It is true that the political report of the Congress quite vociferously trumpeted the old ideological shibboleth. A central theme of the Congress, as shown in Hu Jintao's report, is a call to uphold and further promote socialism with Chinese characteristics, a political jargon that Deng Xiaoping and his cohorts had created to push for their economic reforms.

The all-inclusive discourse of socialism with Chinese characteristics was systematically enunciated at the 13th party congress in 1987. In that political panoply, the crucial argument was that China was still in the primary stage of socialism characterised by a low level of productivity, thus warranting the central focus on economic growth. The reform and opening up programme was supposed to be a fundamental policy for economic growth.

In the meantime, Deng also explicitly set out the political parameters for the reform — the so-called four cardinal principles, including among other things adhering to the socialist road and the leadership

of the CPC. The political elite in the mid-1980s intended to use the blueprint of socialism with Chinese characteristics to carve a middle road to push for economic reforms and suppress the challenges from both the old leftists and Western-influenced liberals.

Why Deng's Clarion Call was invoked

The invocation of the old-fashioned political lexicon serves as an expedient political tool for the current leadership. There is obviously a need to take hold of some sort of ideological slogan in order to legitimise the political rule of the party. By proclaiming that the party still sticks to those political tenets and principles, the party is able to at least apparently give the impression that it is still committed to a grand ideological cause, even though the substance is nebulous. A more important purpose of enshrining the old ideological bottle is to fend off surging political criticisms from both the new left and the right.

In the past few years, the debate over China's political future has witnessed much polarisation, with one group of intellectuals becoming increasingly critical of the negative results of the reform programme: widening gap of income, rampant corruption, the destitute of the working class, the deterioration of morality in the Chinese society, etc. These intellectuals, often labeled as the New Left, blamed the reform programme for all these problems and advocate returning to some sort of a more rigid Leninist political order of the old times. Another group of intellectuals has become increasingly vocal in proposing further liberalisation of the political system, arguing that only further liberalisation is the effective solution to those problems. These people range from western-style political liberals to those who advocate democratic socialism modeled on Northern Europe.

By showcasing the old ideological bottle, the CPC leadership hopes to renew the emphasis of the middle road in order to marginalise the influence of both extremes. By advocating socialism with Chinese characteristics and insisting that China is still in the primary stage of socialism, they intend to tell the New Left that China has to move forward with the reform programme to increase the material wellbeing for the people. The message to the liberals is that conditions are not ripe yet for dramatic political reforms. Clearly, the CPC elite still favours the conventional approach: economic liberalism and political authoritarianism.

Moving towards a Typical Ruling Party

In the past three decades or so, ideology has gradually given way to the imperatives of adapting to socio-economic realities and addressing all sorts of thorny problems. Deng's theoretical guidelines were supposed to launch the reform programme. Former party leader Jiang Zemin's "three represents"-- the CPC representing the broadest common interests of the Chinese people, the most advanced culture, and the most advanced force of production — carried certain ideological elements. The mundane nature of the political orientation of the current party leadership indicates that the CPC is further shaking off its ideological shackles to become a normal ruling party.

The political canons put forward by the current leadership include two major concepts: scientific development and harmonious society. A scientific approach to development, as understood in the Chinese discourse, contains these major policy considerations: narrowing the income gap, reducing regional economic disparity, promoting the efficiency of energy usage, curbing environmental degradation, and building social welfare programs. The term harmonious society refers to less social unrest, a more stable social order, and stronger sense of social morality, and a better relationship between the state and society.

'Scientific approach to development' and 'harmonious society' are essentially pragmatic policy tools and objectives. They have nothing to do with any political ideology. They can be found in the rhetoric of any political party in the world. The scientific approach to development, now written into the party

constitution, assumes an equal status to Marxism, Mao Thought, Deng Theory, and the ‘Three Represents’. In the near future, the scientific development concept will serve as the political guideline in practice. The prominence of this down-to-earth approach of governance marks the culmination of the CPC moving towards the role of a typical ruling party.

Implications of the CPC Transformation

The de-ideologicalisation, so far seemingly successful, demonstrates the party’s ability to adapt to the changed socio-economic reality in China and the political conditions in the world. This transformation, if properly handled, is likely to help the party maintain its ruling position. The decline of doctrinal approaches to ideology means that political struggles at the top echelon might be mitigated to a large extent.

Since there is no ideology to be manipulated as a political tool in power struggles, differences at the policy level are more likely to be tolerated. The life-or-death factional politics that had not been uncommon during the Mao era is unlikely to re-emerge. This in turn gives collective leadership a better chance. In the long run, as collective leadership becomes more institutionalised, it fosters the hope that intra-party democracy can gradually take root.

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