

A century later, the Chinese Communist Party is at the crossroads

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By Sreeram Chaulia

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Chinese President Xi Jinping. (File photo)

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is celebrating its grand centenary on July 1. Founded by Bolshevik Russia-inspired Chinese Marxists in Shanghai in 1921 amid the chaos of China's post-imperial fragmentation, the CCP survived, seized power, restored order, outlasted its mentor, the Soviet Communist Party, and became the arbiter of the destiny of not just China, but in some ways, of the world.

So daunting were the early challenges to the Party from a plethora of opposing armed political factions that only two out of the thirteen delegates who attended the first CCP Congress in 1921 lived to see the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. One of them was Mao Zedong, whose ruthless beliefs that “a revolution is not a dinner party” and that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” gave the CCP an edge over its competitors.

When Mao's PRC was established in 1949, it was through such a bloody process against all odds that the new State's outlook was militaristic and hostile. Following in the footsteps of Vladimir Lenin's “revolutionary terror”, Mao never hesitated to brutally safeguard his revolution and forcibly transform “backward” China through the catastrophic Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Tens of millions of Chinese perished in these social re-engineering experiments, laying bare contradictions between the CCP's motto — “serve the people” — and the people's unwillingness to be railroaded and sacrificed at the altar of the Party's ambitions.

Despite Mao's colossal errors, the CCP hung on to power during its first three ruling decades due to sustained State repression and the aura of the 1949 revolution. After Mao, the Party could not count on prolonging its rule without drastic reforms. In came Deng Xiaoping, who embarked on the “second revolution” that saved the CCP from decline and decay.

The economic liberalisation Deng introduced in the 1980s was an unprecedented experiment in State-guided capitalism, reliant on foreign investment from the West. Although this was a far cry from Maoist dogma,

flexibility had been a hallmark of the CCP's history throughout. Before 1945, it partnered with arch adversary, the Kuomintang (KMT), against imperial Japan, and in the early 1970s it aligned with the capitalist United States (US) to thwart the communist Soviet Union. Pragmatic adjustments at timely junctures explain the resilience of the CCP.

Yet, there is an intransigent core which has been key to the CCP's self-preservation. When the Soviet Communist Party imploded in 1991, many expected the CCP to follow. But Deng and his successors never let up on authoritarian tendencies for fear of losing control. The CCP's merciless crackdown during the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989, and its campaigns of harsh suppression of ethnic minorities in Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia, were justified as necessary for the Party to sustain its rule. China's "modernisation" under the Party came at a heavy human and ecological cost.

Since becoming the CCP's boss in 2012, President Xi Jinping has re-tightened control over civil society and the private sector, and launched a ferocious disciplinary clampdown against corruption by "tigers and flies" in the Party. Xi has revived glorification of Mao by imposing "a correct view of history" and resurrected China's ancient Confucian values and imperial traditions — a mix of old and new — to consolidate his power and propel China's rise to the centrestage in world politics.

A coldblooded politician like Mao, Xi has amended China's constitution to indefinitely remain at the helm. His "Chinese Dream" comprises achievement of two centenaries – a "moderately well-off society" by the CCP's centenary in 2021, and a "fully developed nation" and "strong country" by the PRC's centenary in 2049. In February 2021, Xi declared that China had accomplished the "arduous task of eradicating extreme poverty". With sights set on the 2049 milestone, he has launched audacious international projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and flexed military muscle against rival nations.

Can the CCP carry on as China's almighty institution until 2049 and beyond? Sinologists Minxin Pei and David Shambaugh assess that Xi is overplaying his hand and setting the CCP up for doom. Multiple contradictions are arising between a Party operating under Xi's megalomaniacal cult of personality and a fast-changing, relatively well-off Chinese society that will not willingly accept neo-Maoist propaganda or be satisfied with grandiose nationalistic visions of China as the number one power in the world.

The fate of the CCP also depends on the wary international community. The global backlash against China's mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic and its human rights abuses, and the intent of the US and its partners to halt China's push for global hegemony, indicate harder times ahead. Xi warned the CCP in 2020 of a "period of turbulence" when "we will face more and more headwinds in the external environment." Still, like his hero Mao who steered the Party through extreme difficulties in its formative decades, Xi welcomes a fight and thrives on confrontation.

After 72 uninterrupted years in power and no immediate threat to overthrow it, the CCP can congratulate itself as the most successful communist party in history that single-mindedly converted a weak and poor China into a technologically advanced superpower. But if the CCP forgets its past and fails to reform once again, the "third revolution" of Xi Jinping could be the Party's swansong.

Sreeram Chaulia is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs

The views expressed are personal