

SAFEY Analysis

Xi Jinping emerges as China's most powerful leader since Mao as presidential term limit abolished

Summary

TA landmark decision was made at China's annual political sessions in March when the country's parliament approved a proposal to abolish the 35-year rule of presidential term limits. This effectively means the current President Xi Jinping can rule for life. The abolishment of term limit was hardly surprising as there were already signs that Xi was seeking to extend his term beyond 2023, when he did not name a clear successor at the 19th Party Congress in late 2017. With a stunning performance despite the sluggish global economy, the implications of such political change will be felt not only among the top echelons of the Chinese Communist Party and its people, but more importantly the rest of the world. As Xi ascended to the throne to become one of the most powerful leaders of China in recent decades, this article seeks to understand its implications and how it will further reshape the 21st century world order.

Xi's rise to power

Xi Jinping is often considered to be a princeling as his father was once a veteran under Mao Zedong's leadership before being purged during the cultural revolution. Although being ripped away from his privileged background, his experience amidst the chaos continued to form his view on China and the rest of the world. With strong connections among the political elites, he rose through the ranks of the Communist Party, holding various positions and eventually becoming the party chief of China's financial hub, Shanghai. He successfully secured a seat in the Politburo Standing Committee a year later, paving way for him to become the country's president in March 2013.

The beginning of Xi's presidency was notably different from his predecessors when he launched a major anti-

corruption campaign, purging not only low-ranking officials but also senior ones such as Central Military Commission vice-chairman, Xu Caihou, former Politburo Standing Committee member and security chief, Zhou Yongkang, and Hu Juntao's former chief aide, Ling Jihua. While Xi vowed to root out "tiger and flies" through his anti-corruption campaign, the entire party was also shaken up as the decision-making process at the highest level became more consolidated, instead of the "collective rule" practices by previous leaders. Through his leadership style, Xi also managed to keep at bay the influence of former president Jian Zemin of the Shanghai Clique. This was in stark comparison to his immediate predecessor Hu Juntao, who was thought to have a weaker grip particularly on the military due to Jiang's constant interference.

Xi's culmination to power was apparent when his thoughts on Socialism were enshrined in the Communist Party as well as the country's constitution, making him the second person to do so since Mao. With an ambition to make China a global superpower, Xi's presidency will likely generate continuous scrutiny from domestic and global audiences. Concerns are also plenty with some stating that Xi has effectively put China back on track to become a dictatorship with such amendments and it might make it a more challenging nation to deal with in the long-run. Although China was quick to dismiss such assumptions, the concentration of power on Xi is still a critical turn of events that need to be examined amidst the ever-increasing complexity of global politics.

What is the Two Sessions or "Lianghui"?

- It is the annual gathering of China's parliament namely the National People's Congress (NPC) and the top advisory body of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)
- It is one of the most important meetings in China's political calendar as lawmakers gather to review the annual work report of the government as well as its plans and budget for the year ahead
- Economic targets, as well as environmental and socio-economic issues are discussed during the sessions
- More than 5,000 delegates are expected to attend both sessions

Assertiveness as a key element of China's foreign policy

It is evident that China has taken a bolder stance on international issues since Xi took helm of the presidency in 2013. As demonstrated in the South China Sea dispute, Beijing clearly wouldn't mind flexing its muscles despite continuous complaints by her less powerful neighbours such as Vietnam and the Philippines. Although the US has maintained that the freedom of navigation in the region must be respected, the administration of President Donald Trump appeared to have paid less attention to the dispute compared to his immediate predecessor Barack Obama. The lack of consensus among the

members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in dealing with the issue also enabled the Xi's administration to lay down its claims in a more assertive manner. As he proudly stated during his work report at the Communist Party congress, the island constructions in South China Sea will continue to represent an important element in his government's strategy, therefore hinting that he will not easily give up Beijing's claims to the entire sea.

China under Xi is also less likely to shy away from pressing world issues such as trade and environmental protection, among others. While the US under Trump appears to lean inwards, Xi took the stage at the World Economic Forum in Davos instead to defend free trade by underscoring China's commitment to play a greater global role. Besides that, Xi also continued to vigorously promote his "Belt and Road" initiative not only among China's traditional allies but also those in the western hemisphere. The initiative, which aims at uniting Eurasia through Chinese-backed infrastructure projects and land/sea trade routes, has notably drawn interest from countries such as the United Kingdom, Poland, Greece and Spain, among others. Although it remains to be seen whether Xi will be able to successfully court these countries towards greater involvement in the initiative, it does indicate that Beijing will be reaching out in a more aggressive manner amidst a stronger and confident leadership at home.

Military prowess grows in tandem with Xi's leadership

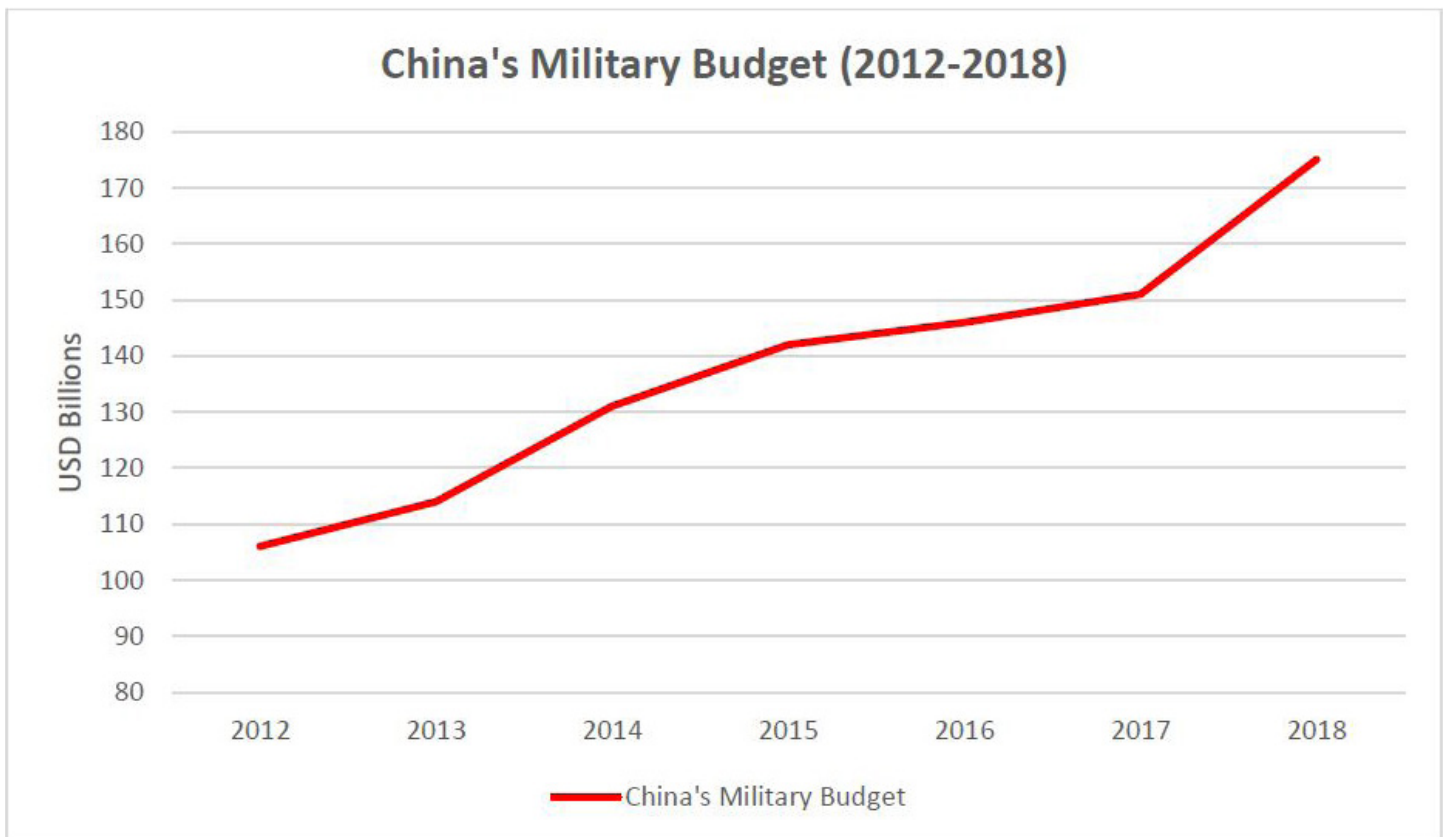
The greater political authority of Xi can also be primarily attributed to his reign in the military upon taking office. For Xi, a strong military is not only critical in securing China's interest as the country's economy grows stronger, but also to cement his political standing. As Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xi extended his anti-corruption campaign efforts to the entire organization, purging several top generals and at the same time highlighting the importance of modernizing the People's Liberation Army.

The defense budget continues to be on the rise with US\$175 billion being allocated for 2018 alone. Although only representing about 1/5 of what is being spent by the US annually, China still ranks second globally in terms of military spending and it is likely to increase in the coming years.

As previously mentioned, one of China's main foreign policy goals also involves securing its interests close and beyond and there is no doubt that Xi finds the solution in having a strong military. This is clearly reflected in his push to make China's military "world class" by the mid-21st century. Among the many programmes, the one that most stands out is the blue water strategy which will allow naval forces to operate globally, thus projecting Beijing's prowess far from home. With one carrier already in operation and two more under construction, the possession of such assets also juxtaposes well with Xi's vision of national rejuvenation at a time when the

country is involved in several maritime disputes with its neighbours.

On the ground, the push for assertiveness is also demonstrated in China's approach when dealing with land border disputes, particularly with its regional rival, India. For instance, during the 2017 border stand-off with India over the Chinese construction of a road in Doklam, Beijing's insistence that India entered its territory showed Xi's resolve in when dealing with such disputes and he would not back down easily even if it means direct confrontation with the opposite side. Although both sides eventually disengaged after two months, Xi's praise of the military is a sign that Beijing might be using the same template in future territorial disputes, by constructing infrastructures and deploying troops as ways to stall them or even to establish its rights of ownership.



Without a succession plan, it seems fairly plausible that Xi will stay beyond 2023 in order to complete his vision for a China that “can stand tall in the world” by 2050. His large power base however does not necessarily mean it is without risks, as the Communist Party has often witnessed intense rivalries within its ranks that even Xi himself has not been exempt from. As with past leaders, the inclusion of former corruption czar, Wang Qishan as his vice-president will likely tighten Xi's grip in both the government and the party.

Wang has been one of Xi's trusted allies and has often been regarded as “Mr Fix-it” for his ability to tackle many thorny issues that faced the country in the past, including the SARS outbreak in 2003. By successfully enlisting more of his associates into the top decisionmaking body, Xi has clearly drawn out his intention that he is here to stay, but the milliondollar question going forward is how long exactly is he going to be at helm of the presidency, and if he indeed steps down one day, will he continue to play a key role from behind the scenes.

