

THE RESILIENCE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA

LUIS CUNHA

luisfmcunha@gmail.com

PhD in International Relations, integrated researcher at Instituto do Oriente (ISCSP/University of Lisbon, Portugal), and author of the following books on China's geopolitics: *China: Cooperação e Conflito na Questão de Taiwan* (2010), *A Hora do Dragão – Política Externa da China* (2012), *China na Grande Guerra – A Conquista da Nova Identidade Internacional* (2014) e *China`s Techno-Nationalism in the Global Era – Strategic Implications for Europe* (2016). He has published several articles in national and foreign journals on Asia-Pacific geopolitics.

Abstract

Upon reaching 100 years of activity, the Communist Party of China (CPC) highlights and projects a unique model of political and social development. Taking as methodological inspiration the proposal of Samuel P. Huntington for the study of the political phenomenon, regarding the adaptability of the seat of power, this work focus on some of the variables that justify the perpetuity of the CPC.

Culture and ideology drive an unparalleled evolutionary process in conventional systemic frameworks, legitimized by an outfit with intrinsic Chinese characteristics. China's apparent exceptionalism, based on a strong nationalist vision, is conveyed through a transformational "new era." Western academic currents denote difficulty in framing this phenomenon with global implications.

Keywords

Communist Party of China; Xi Jinping; Chinese dream; nationalism; centenary.

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LUIS CUNHA

Introduction

Political scientist Samuel P. Huntington considers that the institutionalization of a political system can be measured by the adaptability, autonomy and coherence of its organizations and procedures.

That definition fits perfectly the centenary CPC, which has not only overcome the countless adversities of its long trajectory, but now emerges, in the first quarter of the 21st century, apparently strengthened in its ideological development plan for China.

Openly assuming an autonomous project, differentiated from the models rooted in the proposals of the liberal democracies of the West, CPC and its leadership highlight the predicates of a singular civilizational and political culture, a carrier of presumed added value – in the officially conveyed version – in relation to alien political systems, which they consider fallible. Throughout its long history, the non-aligned CPC has systematically tried to evade the "logic of dependency" aptly characterized by Bertrand Badie, in the westernization of the political order in "imported states" (2000).

Some of these dominant traits in the history of CPC, and in the discourse of its leaders, are worth reflecting on. This paper addresses some of the aspects that justify the survival of the largest communist party in the world, its organizational institutionalization, and intrinsic vulnerabilities. In the finale, we confront the main dissenting views – American and Chinese – on the case study that the CPC embodies.

The Chinese route

An official document released by Xinhua news agency in June 2021 recalled that Western academic theories have denoted great difficulty in framing and justifying the survival of the CPC, and the meteoric rise of China in different dimensions of power.

The text would serve as an antechamber to the conclusions of the 6th plenary session of the 19th CPC Central Committee and the "white papers" on the functioning of democracy in China, as well as the CPC's position on the Hong Kong administration.

¹ Article translated by Hugo Alves.



Common to all documents is the reference to the originality of the path chosen by the Communist Party for the development of China, emphasizing the civilizational acquis of the country, the refusal to align in the model of liberal democracies of the West and the role of the General Secretary as the "central core" of the Central Committee and the whole Party, which now has as "ideology-guide" Xi Jinping's thought about "socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era".

In fact, we are before a type of revisionism with Chinese features. And, as Aron pointed out, "the opposition between revisionist State and conservative is often misleading" (2002: 142), but it is no less certain that the route chosen by the CPC, the Party-State, claims the originality of its ascension project.

Assuming itself as a genuine and pragmatic party, closely linked to popular aspirations, the CPC repeatedly repudiates what it considers to be the "chaos of Western-style democracy", offering, in return, a "functioning democracy" based on theoretical innovations, which highlight the adaptation of Marxism to the Chinese reality, in addition to the thought of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin's triple representativeness theory, or Hu Jintao's scientific theory of development.

At the academic level, these political theories are supported by attempts to build a model of international relations appropriate to China's contemporary projection, of which traditionalist currents of constructivist moral or relational realism are examples.

One of the major challenges in the study of China's foreign policy is the theorization of the patterns and behaviors measured and their framework in the international relations. Authors such as Zhao Tingyang, Yan Xuetong or Qin Yaking try to bridge this gap through their works by seeking to integrate China into the world order.

It is in this context that we can frame Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream", which proposes an inclusive and harmonious process for China's development and affirmation, but also a multipolar order. It is a process of ideological and political renewal, using the rehabilitated Confucianism and cultural traditionalism, mixed with the inescapable Marxism in the Chinese version.

But it is the Leninist logic, attributing to the Party the indisputable authority legitimized by democratic centralism, that consolidates and unites the trinity constituted by CPC-State-People's Liberation Army (PLA). On the other hand, despite the Leninist costume, the CPC strives to highlight the democratization of its processes within the limits imposed by loyalty to the party. The "white paper", with the suggestive title "The Functioning Democracy" (PRC Council of State: 2021), recalls that there are eight other parties in the Chinese political system, but that they must all obey the CPC.

The partial opening of the CPC to democratic processes should not be read as ideological liberalization, but as an attempt to refine and improve its functional and organic methods. For Zheng Yongnian, this process, which he called "internal pluralism," integrates the meritocracy inherited from the imperial era with elements of modern democracy (2020:16). The construction of "socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era", has as main objective to strengthen the party itself. The CPC placed special emphasis on the delicate selection and recruitment process for its staff, thus becoming an elitist political organization.



However, to overcome the exhaustion of the economic model adopted since China's opening to the world in 1978, the CPC has revised its position, which now involves the defense of an alternative model for globalization, the proposal for new complementary international organizations and/or alternatives to the Bretton Woods system, and a shared destiny for humanity. And although the CPC does not openly admit that the "Chinese model" is exportable, it considers that "the experience and practice of the CPC can offer good references to others" (*People First*: 2021). According to Xi Jinping's speech marking the 95th anniversary of the CPC, what is at stake is not so much the "Chinese model", but the "Chinese solution". Shortly thereafter, in his speech to the 19th CPC Congress, Xi came very close to promoting a Chinese model of international relations, noting that China's path "offers a new option for other countries and nations that want to accelerate their development, while preserving their independence" (2017).

While the United States of America (USA) administrations of Trump and Biden accuse China of being a "revisionist" power, committed to dismembering the international *status quo* (see National Security Strategy: 2017; National Defense Strategy of the United States: 2018), China stresses that it intends only to promote "more democracy in international relations". On the other hand, the USA stance during the Trump Administration, harassing allies and withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership project, a measure that benefited China, was seen by some observers as another strain of revisionism, no less pernicious than China's.

The concept of "revisionism" lends itself to different interpretations, depending on the "orders" to which it refers. For Alastair Ian Johnston, who identifies eight international "orders", China is markedly a "constitutive" power, that is, based on the conception of sovereignty and territoriality and, not least, on the preservation of the CPC (2019: 9-60). He considers that China interacts with the different "orders" in a different way. It supports some, does not support others and supports others only partially.

Odd political laboratory

In his book *The Party*, Richard MacGregor called the survival of the CPC a "political miracle" (2012: 33). If we consider that its founding inspiration, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), was extinguished three decades ago, the assertion proves to be valid. There are, however, other important variables in question. In the monolithic Chinese political system, nothing is lost, and everything is transformed, by the work and ingenuity of a party capable of remarkable adaptive capacity.

Over the course of a century, the CPC was able to overcome, with greater or lesser degree of success, all its crises and internal contradictions, becoming the largest and most powerful communist party in the world². The CPC is responsible for the unparalleled power projection in China's history, thanks to competent management of the geostrategic and geoeconomics agenda. China, governed by an omnipresent Party-State, is an unparalleled political laboratory.

² In addition to the PRC, Cuba, North Korea, and Laos are the other officially communist States. Only the Communist Party of North Korea surpasses the CPC in longevity.



However, one of the many paradoxes of the CPC, perhaps the main one, is that it failed to achieve communism when it completed its centenary. This apparent contradiction is openly accepted in the Party Constitution, when it states that "the goal of the CPC is the realization of communism" and that "the most important ideal of communism persecuted by the Chinese Communists can only be realized when socialist society is fully developed and highly advanced"³.

A goal that could be partially achieved in 2049, when celebrating the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the CPC lexicon, this milestone of the double centenary will mark the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"⁴.

In fact, the communist chimera will not be easily attainable, as the history of the second half of the 20th century revealed with the implosion of the Soviet Union and its Communist Party. Some scholars even argue that the Soviets never implemented communism, since the USSR's party leaders would have opted for state capitalism (Resnick and Wolff, 2002: 324). Others, such as David Shambaugh, go further by vaticinating the collapse of the CPC in the medium term. For that American sinologist, the CPC will be fatally contaminated with systemic weaknesses that could lead to a violent end of the regime (2015).

It will now be up to the CPC and its 91 million militants to prove definitively that the communist ideal, recalibrated with "Chinese characteristics", can turn utopia into reality. The Soviet nightmare would be compounded by Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream".

Although the CPC does not hide the trauma caused by the disappearance of its Soviet counterpart, doing so that history does not repeat itself tragically, Leninist costumes and state capitalism remain as some of the main pillars of the Party. The CPC, "the most enduring asset of Soviet Russia in Foreign Policy" (Chang and Halliday, 2005: 39), or the "most successful Leninist Party in History" (Zheng, 2020: 1), calls itself the task of triumphing in the techno nationalist confrontation with the West.

A Party of Variable Geometry

The CPC divides its centenary route into three periods: from its foundation in Shanghai (1921), to the proclamation of the PRC (1949); from that year until the opening to the world and the beginning of reforms (1978); and since the coming to power of the current leader, Xi Jinping (2012).

In the official version, the CPC⁵ was founded in July 1921 by a dozen activists, following the failure suffered by China at the Peace conference in Versailles after World War I,

³ *Constitution of the Communist Party of China, Revised and adopted at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 24, 2017*, p. 1. According to the official Chinese speech, China "will continue for a long time in the primary phase of socialism." At the 16th CPC Congress, in 2002, this period had been established in "more than 100 years". See: *Documents of the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, Foreign Languages Press, 2002, pp. 78-79.

⁴ The two centenaries established by the CPC aim to build a moderately prosperous society on the centenary of the Party (2021) and a modern socialist society when the CPC celebrates its centenary (2049).

⁵ Note the semantic differentiation: in December 1920 the French Communist Party was founded and in March 1921 the Portuguese Communist Party; the CPC, founded in July 1921, adopted the designation of Communist Party *from China* (our italics). According to the authors of a biography of Mao Tse-Tung, the CPC was founded in 1920 and Mao would not be among the founders. See Chang, J., Halliday, J. (2005). *Mao, The Unknown History*. Lisbon: Bertrand.



which saw the great powers sanction the Japanese occupation of the Chinese province of Shandong, and the nationalist-inspired student demonstrations that followed it, in what became known as the "May 4th movement" (1919).

The Chinese Communists, who were not familiar with Marxism, whose economic theory did not cohere with Chinese reality, still saw in that doctrine imported from the Bolshevik Revolution, an ideological primer ready to use in the fight against Western imperialism (Dreyer, 1996: 64-65).

By adapting Marxism to the situation in China, the founders of the CPC opted for ideological flexibility with Chinese characteristics that would remain to this day. It would be Mao Tse-Tung to warn of the need for the Chinese Communists to "sinolization of Marxism". To this extent, "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era", the theory of Xi Jinping consecrated by the CPC at its 19th Congress, is seen as the latest progress in the adaptation of Marxism to the Chinese context.

During the first 28 years of existence, the CPC was forced to obey Stalin's dictates and fight the Kuomintang Party, its political archrival, led by Chiang Kai-Chek. Revealing the remarkable political agility that would characterize him in the following decades, Mao would even join the Kuomintang, by Stalin's indication.

The expedition to the North, with the CPC still allied with the Kuomintang (1924-27), the Agrarian Revolutionary War (1927-37), the War of Resistance Against Japan (1927-37) and the Civil War, or "Liberation War" (1946-49), were the main historical landmarks of this period. Mao followed in Lenin's footsteps, jumping from Marxist theory to action, only by inverting the sequence.

With the proclamation of the PRC on October 1, 1949, the CPC would assume the reins of power under a political-institutional monopoly. Mao's victory would surprise Truman and Stalin (Gaddis, 2021: 47). The Chinese communist dynasty and the Party-State were born, in an organic and functional interdependence of Leninist inspiration. For the first time in centuries, China was moving to union under one flag.

It ended a troubled period, marked by more than forty changes of the central government since the establishment of the republic in 1912. However, internal pacification was not assured. Externally, Mao would risk the existence of the State he had just created. Just over a year after the proclamation of the PRC, the Chinese army was fighting the Americans in Korea.

The first major step towards China's identity emancipation would be the sending of 140.000 workers to the stages of WWI in Europe. In the aftermath of the conflict, the "May 4th Movement" would serve as an embryo to the founding of the CPC.

On the other hand, without fighting the Japanese in WWII, the CPC would not have been able to achieve power, as Mao himself would have admitted. The rise and consolidation of the CPC's power is based on historical facts associated with the two world wars. Since then, the Chinese have cultivated a harnessed anti-Western nationalism.

The Party-State



The CPC began by adapting the Soviet-inspired Leninist costume to Chinese reality. Democratic centralism – the subordination of the individual to the organization and its leaders – began to govern the functioning of the party machine. Like the CPSU, the Chinese counterpart established at its summit the governing bodies, namely the Central Committee (elected every five years by the Party Congress), responsible for selecting the Politburo (25 members).

In turn, the Politburo elects its Standing Committee, the hard core of policy makers, the current seven men (not including women; 70% of the Party members are men) who define China's path. The powerful *nomenklatura*, in Soviet terminology. The *primus inter pares* is the General Secretary, who also assumes the position of President of the Republic and president of the Central Military Commission. The Secretariat has the task of implementing the decisions of the Politburo and its Standing Committee.

However, some characteristics of the CPC differ from the Soviet system. First, the Party's ability to penetrate the social, economic, and military fabric. The CPC is present in every corner of society, forcing unconditional loyalty. The military owes constitutional obedience to the Party as well as the judicial system. The same applies to the public sector of the economy, which includes some of the best-known companies internationally, the so-called "industry champions". This is how Xi Jinping's "thought... reflects the common will of the whole Party, all the Armed Forces and the people of all ethnic groups" (Announcement of the 6th Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC).

Constitutionally, the Soviet government and the CPSU were separate bodies, although reality belied this artificialism. In China, the Party has always made it clear that it would be solely responsible for controlling the whole of society. Consequently, the close interconnection between Party and State is indistinguishable. In the official language "it is necessary to ensure that the leadership of the Party and the State remains in the hands of those who are loyal to Marxism, the Party and the people" (*China: Democracy That Works*: 8).

When world leaders meet with President Xi Jinping, in his capacity to hold an eminently ceremonial office in accordance with the constitution of the PRC, they have before them the powerful General Secretary of the CPC.

By resetting legal formalities, since it is not registered as an organization, the Party legitimizes its ubiquitous influence in the conquest of power following Civil War, on economic and social development since China's openness to the world, in its nationalist view and on the spiritual purity derived from dogmatic partisan principles, assisted by a culturalist vision rooted in Confucian philosophy – a social code that has regulated Chinese society for thousands of years. A social contract that the Chinese subscribe to, if opportunities for prosperity and wealth are not called into question.

The deployment

Mao Tse-Tung, the supreme leader of the CPC until his death in 1976, had no urgency in reorganizing the Party after the founding of the PRC. The first five-year plan was only approved in 1953 and the first CPC congress only took place in 1956 (until 1977 none completed the five-year term). In turn, the National People's Congress (NPC), founded



in 1954, did not meet between 1966 and 1974 (Dreyer, 1996: 90-91). Also, in 1954 the first Constitution of the PRC was approved.

Mao would prove to be paradoxically the most troubled leader of the CPC. In the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), he was responsible for 36 to 45 million deaths (Yang, 2008: 2; Dikötter, 2011: 1). By promoting the forced transition from an underdeveloped economy to a utopian modern communist society, Mao brought China's social and economic system to the brink of collapse.

Still poorly redone from the catastrophe of Maoist experimentalism, the Chinese people were forced to immerse themselves in the Cultural Revolution (1962-1976), which would prove to be another black page of the CPC and its leader, committed to stirring the masses through constant revolutionary unrest. Seeing himself as the rightful heir to Marxism-Leninism, Mao once again wanted to accelerate the transition from socialism to communism, thereby guaranteeing his historical legacy. The purges and political persecution within the CPC, as well as physical and psychological torture and exile, would become commonplace. The Party was virtually paralyzed. Five million militants would be punished (Dikötter, 2017: 10). The students, mobilized for revolutionary combat, would eventually be the main victims of the Cultural Revolution. Xi Jinping would be one of them. Teaching in China would delay a decade.

The adoption of collective leadership and the abolition of the cult of personality and "Mao's thought" as an ideological guide had been enshrined in the 8th CPC Congress, but in the following 12 years Mao was able to reverse these principles. At the 9th Congress (1969), led by a politically resurrected Mao, the Cultural Revolution was officially declared "a great success" (Li, 1994: 508). It was in that year that he came to consider the Soviet Union, not the USA, the greatest threat to China's security.

The rapprochement with the USA would be the greatest success of the final phase of Mao's political career. A maneuver exquisitely executed by the master of tactics that was Chu Enlai, the Prime Minister.

Historical rectification

The death of Mao Tse-Tung and the consequent assumption of power by the formerly ostracized Deng Xiaoping opened a chapter of paramount importance in the evolution of the CPC, which carried out an unprecedented exercise of self-criticism, to rectify the delicate Maoist legacy.

The important Resolution on the History of the CPC, adopted at the 6th plenary session of the 11th Central Committee of the Party (1981), reviewed the "arbitrary" performance of Mao Tse-Tung and his "theoretical and practical errors". Particular attention was paid to the period of the Cultural Revolution, which "did not conform either to Marxism-Leninism, nor to the Chinese reality". Although the CPC considered Mao to be the main responsible for the social catastrophe triggered by the Cultural Revolution, by "confusing the people with the enemy", the resolution made it clear that the scientific value of "Mao's thought" remained valid as the ideological beacon of the Party.

By openly exposing the wounds opened by a leader "divorced from reality and the masses", the CPC intended to initiate a process of internal regeneration, while at the



same time validating Deng Xiaoping's reformist project. But China's openness to the world, which began in 1978, and the resulting economic development, entailed existential risks to the CPC that would prove dramatically.

Tiananmen

The CPC would not produce a document like the 1981 self-critical resolution on the failures of the Cultural Revolution. The causes and effects of Tiananmen events in 1989 would be obliterated from official historiography. The official documentation of the CPC is silent on the hectic period, which could have overthrown the Ruling Party, although this was not the goal of the protesting students (Zhao, 2009: 79).

All authoritarian regimes depend to a greater or lesser extent on repression and Deng Xiaoping, more Leninist than Maoist, did not hesitate to avail himself of "disciplinary power" in Foucault's meaning. However, by resorting to the use of force to stop the CPC's internal bleeding caused by students' demonstrations, the legacy of Deng Xiaoping, the great statesman responsible for China's modernization, would be irreparably tarnished. On the other hand, Gorbachev, the controversial leader responsible for the implosion of the Soviet Union, would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

A decade earlier, Deng had even vented the possibility of a separation between the Party and State, a reform never realized, provided that the impossibility of political liberalization was maintained as an unbreakable rule in the light of the tripartite model of separation of powers adopted in the West. This red line would be maintained and reinforced by subsequent CPC leaders.

The Civilizational Party of China

A centuries-old communist party, in power under a monopoly and ruling for as long as the SUCP ruled the former Soviet Union, is obliged to take care of its legitimacy in a permanent way.

One of the keys to understanding the CPC's perpetuity will be Bertrand Russel's judicious observation, when he concluded that "China is not so much a political entity, but a civilization" (1993: 208). That is, the principle of national unity is firm in the valorization of civilizational heritage. This results in a sense of moral superiority *vis-à-vis* the West that the CPC cultivates on a recurring basis. To this extent, more than an interpreter of the history of China, the CPC is a central actor in this story. Its legitimacy privileges the historicist perspective over the ideological one.

It is this culturalist thesis, based on Chinese exceptionalism, that legitimizes the originality of the political system, transforming the CPC into the exclusive representative and guardian of a certain historical truth. The virtue of Confucian inspiration was shaped by socialist values, resulting in "Chinese characteristics".

For Zhang Wewei, it is the "civilizational state", led and interpreted by the CPC, that allowed the "greatest economic and social revolution of humanity" (2012:2). The Chinese scholar recalls that China has successfully merged the longest-off civilization with a modern state. A unit forged in history and habit, superior to any form of government.



Another reading finds justification in Chinese society's aversion to chaos, so often experienced in its history. In fact, the official discourse does not miss an opportunity to emphasize the unifying role of the CPC, a true dynamo of a country formed by 56 ethnic groups. As historian Niall Ferguson recalls, if China were organized like Europe, it would have to be divided into 90 nation-States (2012: 10).

Institutionalization

Non-Western societies struggle between the logics of adaptation and innovation (Badie, 2000: 2). Chinese society is no exception. Throughout a century, the CPC has succeeded in mitigating the contradictory forces of the political system it has implemented.

And although the CPC has regained imperial logic in *its modus operandi* and in China's positioning as an international actor, the institutionalization of transition processes in the ruling elite has allowed the 5th generation to achieve an unprecedented global power.

The CPC is not only shaped in the state machine, but also controls it in all dimensions, becoming a "Party-State without complexes" (Rios, 2021: 304). This oversight has been intensified through the organic reforms implemented by Xi Jinping in the judicial, military, and legislative spheres, at an unprecedented rate, which create a new impetus to China's political and economic trajectory. Xi's leadership has embarked on a process of institutional transformation that aims to reverse many of the changes consolidated by the relative liberalization of recent decades (Economy, 2018: 5; Bowring, 2021:239).

For Huntington, "the probability of a 100-year-old organization surviving another year is, perhaps, 100 times greater than the probability that an organization with one year will survive another year" (1968: 13-14). Maybe that is why the official documents say that "the 100-year-old CPC, which fights for the lasting prosperity of the Chinese nation, is in *the prime of age*" (Announcement of the 6th Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC).

The core of the CPC

Xi Jinping is a transformational leader, only comparable to Mao and Deng, charismatic leaders. He is imbued with a historical ineffability as to the mission of transforming China into the most powerful of nations. But Xi is not charismatic, but rational in the Weberian sense. He keeps the Party away from liberalization, firmly rejecting the division of powers and parliamentarism and does not hesitate to resort to the repressive instruments of the State. He is a strong leader with a well-defined political project. He drew the red lines when, in the spring of 2013, an internal memo from the CPC (document no. 9) outlined the main existential threats of the Party, including western-matrix constitutional democracy and neoliberalism (Bougon, 2018: 153-158).

When he took the 5th generation leadership to achieve power in China in 2012, *Financial Times* reported the possibility of Xi being "sympathetic to the demands for a more liberal



political system"⁶. Not only did this prediction prove erroneous, but Xi would reveal a style of strong one-person leadership, while neutralizing collective governance – which never fully worked – and the ban on the cult of personality advocated by the CPC since Deng Xiaoping.

Xi's first consecration took place at the 19th CPC Congress in 2017. In five years, he managed to consolidate his power and inscribe his doctrine in the CPC Constitution, placing himself alongside Mao and Deng in the pantheon of immortal leaders.

It was a measure of great political significance, since Deng Xiaoping's name was only inscribed in the CPC Constitution after his death, and Jiang Zemin only managed to get his "theory of triple representativeness" (translated into the co-optation of the party's business) to be recognized after he left power. In turn, Hu Jintao's "theory of scientific development" was inscribed in the Constitution after his first term, but only elevated to "guide to action" after he left office.

More recently, the Party has come to mark a clear dividing line between the period of reforms set by Deng and a "new era" of 30 years, which began in 2020. In the first 15 years, until 2035, Xi wants to see the foundations of a "moderately prosperous" society consolidated and in the second stage of 15 years, until 2045, the modernization of the "socialist society" must be consolidated.

Much of Xi's meteoric rise was justified by the internal cleansing campaign to fight corruption, which has hit thousands of members of the Party and Armed Forces, including prominent leaders. At issue will be a real "ethical revolution" designed to sustain the legitimacy of the Party (Zhang and McGhee, 2017). It is undeniable, however, the remarkable capacity for party and national mobilization of Xi, which goes far beyond the internal purges within the Party. By appealing to nationalist sentiments, Xi invokes and enshrines his emotional legitimacy.

Since the beginning of this century, China has been exploring the strategic opportunities evidenced at the 16th CPC Congress, but it is at Xi Jinping's consulate that China shows all its power and assertiveness. Xi's official narrative has definitively eliminated the understated strategy for China's foreign statement recommended by Deng Xiaoping.

China, which may rise to the status of the world's greatest economic power soon, is now "approaching the center of the stage" and is already "a leader in terms of national strength and international influence" (Xi, 2019: 9-25). It also wants to build powerful armed forces, "capable of winning wars", already possessing the largest war navy in the world, in addition to having put in place an ambitious nuclear rearmament plan and have advanced disruptive technologies, namely hypersonic missiles, electromagnetic pulse weapons and cyberweapons. As Aron pointed out, "States can be prophetic, but they are always armed" (2002: 131).

⁶ Anderlini, Jamil, "The leAdeRship: focus on the next generation as transition gets under way," *Financial Times*, October 26, 2011. [Online] Consulted on 23.11.2021. Available in: <https://www.ft.com/content/ec0d167e-f8c3-11e0-ad8f-00144feab49a>.



Conclusions

The CPC did not win the utopia but overtook it. Throughout its history, the CPC has learned to live with numerous paradoxes and contradictions. It has become a hybrid centrifuge machine, capable of absorbing, regenerating, and returning to society the different political and economic approaches. It combines authoritarianism with pragmatism. It is a resilient organization, currently run by a resilient leader.

China did not invent Marxism-Leninism, nationalism, or capitalism. However, the CPC has proved to be an expert cultivator of these seemingly antagonistic currents. But it is primarily to nationalism, and the "imagined political community", that the CPC will redeem its legitimacy.

A legitimacy that China wants to see transposed to the international scene, where, more than taking a central role, wants to see validated its proposal for a new development-focused order, of which the proposed *One Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) is an example, resulting in clear geopolitical and geoeconomics implications. This is an unprecedented global vision. It is in this context that the scholar Zhang Weiwei, author of *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State*, integrates a Chinese intellectual chain that, in addition to rejecting any emulation with Western political models, considers that the time has come for China to influence the world.

On the other hand, stability and the quality of governance are credits that some Western circles have difficulty recognizing to Chinese leaders. The external indicators of economic development are extraordinary and the strategic combination of soft power with hard power (within the meaning of "smart power" of Nye) too, but it is the fact that the CPC has managed to lift 800 million Chinese out of poverty, 10 years ahead of schedule for the first of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which impresses by the scale and socio-economic implications.

In the constitutions of the Republic and the CPC, we find the obligatory communist lexicon referring to a popular democratic dictatorship, democratic centralism, and the struggle for the working class. In fact, the "proletariat" has given way to businessmen co-opted by the Party at the time of Jiang Zemin, and the "class struggle" is now reduced to the contradiction evidenced in the social inequality caused by rampant economic development. A structural fragility that the CPC openly admits in its official documents.

Over a century, the CPC has succeeded in achieving one of the main objectives that it has presided over: the transformation of China into a strong and independent country. The CPC has led China to a level never reached in its long history, finally enjoying power and prestige in the notion that Morgenthau attributed to it (1985: 714).

And if some deep *connoisseurs* of Chinese reality, such as Susan Shirk (2007) or David Shambaugh (2008; 2015) support the thesis of the irreversible decline of the CPC in the medium term, listing known systemic weaknesses, the institutional reforms implemented by Xi Jinping, covering the functioning of the CPC and the Armed Forces, have been modernizing and strengthening the PLA-State-relationship. In fact, Xi has operated to rationalize the institutional architecture of the CPC; the fundamental point is the necessary – and required – accommodation and loyalty of all social actors to the hegemonic dynamics of the party. Nor is it believable that the relative neutralization of



collective leadership – which has never fully worked – will have counterproductive consequences in the new institutional organic implemented in Xi's governance.

The available indicators show that the CPC enjoys a high degree of popularity, while the party elite maintains the necessary cohesion. These are crucial factors for the perpetuation of the necessary legitimacy and foresees that the place of strategic power in the Chinese political system – the CPC – will not be threatened soon. The great challenge of the CPC's top leader will be to operate the transition between authoritarianism and technological innovation.

China, with an autocratic regime led by the resilient CPC, will not intend to export its Marxist-Leninist-Maoist and now Xiist ideology. Rather, it demands the legitimacy of a model unrelated to the concept of universalism pervading the political order of the West. Moreover, Huntington too would draw timely attention to the fact that the West is unique, but not universal (1996).

China's new assertive and self-confident stance, nullifying the theory of "peaceful ascension," has led to a reactive policy by Washington, USA, major European capital-cities and even NATO, which considers China "a full-spectrum systemic rival," (NATO, 2020:27)." For the European Union, for example, China is now "a systemic adversary promoting alternative models of governance" (2019), but is also "a partner, a competitor and a rival" (Borell, 2021). On the other hand, the chemical crisis served as a catalyst for geopolitical clarification in the relationship between the main western powers and China. In fact, the CPC has managed to win unprecedented power in China's history, but as Kissinger warned, "the question is whether it is possible to create an international system with China as a participant without it dominating the system (2011: 43)".

For more than a century the world has been torn between the views of Lenin and Woodrow Wilson in a perennial ideological divide. It will be the quality of governance and the battle for technological leadership to decide whether there will be winners or just losers in the dispute between major powers. It will be seen whether China will look more like the world, or the world like China.

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