

# FIIA 12/2013 COMMENT

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## **Is the Communist Party dragging China back into the shadow of Mao? > China's new leadership is all about unity and will not allow any internal dissent.**

The global politico-economic situation necessitates reforms and greater openness from China's new leadership both domestically and internationally. However, the Communist Party's decision-making ability seems constrained by its fixation on the preservation of unity and stability.

One year after the 18th Communist Party Congress and half a year after Xi Jinping's inauguration as President of the People's Republic of China, the goals of the new leadership are slowly becoming discernible. Some observers may have expected Xi to lead China towards a more liberal direction in economy and politics, but such hopes now resemble wishful thinking. Despite the soft-toned rhetoric of "China's dream", the underlying theme in the policies of the Communist Party is maintaining unity at all costs.

President Xi recently completed his third foreign trip, which took him to the G20 meeting in Moscow, as well as to the capitals of four Central Asian states. Obviously, China has strong economic interests in Central Asia, and new, significant deals in the energy sector were signed during the visit.

However, the political significance of the visit is equally great. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization continues to be an important tool for China, not only in terms of foreign policy but also internally. During the final leg of Xi's tour, China and Kyrgyzstan vowed to fight the three evil forces of religious extremism, ethnic separatism and international terrorism. This was a reference to the ethnic and even irredentist disputes

in China's north-western territory, Xinjiang, which are a constant headache for the Chinese government. And of course, China is still in the process of pacifying Tibet, too.

The Chinese government needs territorial unity both tangibly and intangibly.

In terms of the former, instability in the strategically important border regions entails security risks. There is also a theoretical possibility that granting real autonomy to the currently only nominally autonomous border regions could set a precedent for other provinces, such as the rich coastal ones, to start demanding more freedom from the central government.

In terms of the latter, the Communists came to power with the promise of putting an end to the century-long era of division and chaos. By and large, the Party has followed through on that promise, but there are still unresolved issues, including the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, or the status of Taiwan as a *de facto* separate political entity. As long as these thorns in the flesh remain, the government cannot afford to show flexibility in any related issues.

Domestically, the harsh sentencing of former Party leader of Chongqing City, Bo Xilai, indicates

that the Party will not allow any internal dissent or challenge to the current leadership. The Party's dedication to its anti-corruption drive is of only secondary importance in this regard.

Bo's downfall does not, however, indicate the weakness of the "leftists" – meaning old-school Communists – in the Party. First, it is questionable whether Bo was a leftist, even if the nostalgic appeal of some Cultural Revolution era gimmicks in his political campaigning was probably aimed at charming the Party elders. Second, the fact that Xi Jinping is resorting to Maoist terminology confirms that the old guard is still powerful. Xi has called for an ideological purification campaign, and talked of the "mass line" as a means of bringing the Party closer to the people.

The state media have attacked "Westernization", a war has been declared against "rumour mongering" on the internet, and educational institutions have reportedly been banned from teaching "universal values". Xi Jinping has declared that the Party must revitalize the "four cardinal principles", namely upholding the people's democratic dictatorship, the socialist road, the leadership of the Communist Party, and Marxism-Leninism and Mao

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Zedong Thought. The current political atmosphere has distinct echoes of the era of Jiang Zemin, who is still one of the influential Party elders.

The current Party rhetoric makes China's dream look eerie. China's dream is said to stand for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and the two upcoming centennials, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party in 2021, and the establishment of the People's Republic in 2049, are the major goalposts for the realization of that dream. The Party will let nothing rock the boat while it sits at the helm, resolutely steering in its chosen direction.

The world is awaiting China's input for solving the crisis in Syria, and other grave international questions. Unfortunately, it seems that the Chinese leadership is too preoccupied with the maintenance of internal stability to think beyond its own borders, except in certain matters. These would include concerns directly related to either its hunger for natural resources, asserting its status as a major power counterbalancing the USA in Asia, or issues related to its own legitimacy and public support, such as the island disputes with Japan.

At the same time, the world is increasingly committed to China's

stability, subscribing to the Chinese government's mantra that only stability will keep the economy thriving.

It is possible that the new leadership's line will gradually change when it has secured its power to a sufficient degree. However, it is unlikely that any changes will occur before the next Party Congress in 2017, when some of the oldest members of the Politburo Standing Committee may have to retire.

It is also possible that – like so many times before – rhetoric will remain rhetoric, and China will not really move back into the shadow of Mao. Nevertheless, while the leadership is new, their behaviour seems to follow the age-old leitmotif of maintaining unity for unity's sake. The Chinese emperor's new clothes therefore reveal naked power.