

# Xi's China Dream – its appeal and dangers

Whatever personnel and policy changes emerge from the 20th party congress, China's ambitions and revanchist ethnonationalist goals will endure.



A screen in Shanghai showing China's President Xi Jinping speaking during the opening session of the 20th party congress on Sunday. In his opening speech, Mr Xi said that "China's international influence, appeal and power to shape the world have significantly increased". PHOTO: AFP



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For the Straits Times

Barring being hit by a stray thunderbolt, in a few days Mr Xi Jinping will get a third term. That much is certain. The question is: What will he do with it? The commentator has gone into overdrive about possible personnel and policy changes that the 20th party congress may bring. Given China's geopolitical and economic importance, speculation is understandable but, in such an opaque system, somewhat futile. We will know when Mr Xi chooses to let us know. Until he does, we are all only reading tea leaves and can only compose ourselves in patience. But we can be sure about one thing: China's ambitions will not change and are unlikely to be tempered during Mr Xi's third term and beyond.

In his opening speech at the congress on Sunday, Mr Xi said the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation was now "on an irreversible historical course" and that "China's international influence, appeal and power to shape the world have significantly increased".

China's ambitions are vast. There is nothing unusual about a big country having big ambitions. What is important is the nature of those ambitions and their implications. That is crucial for small countries on China's periphery. Reading China's ambitions wrongly could be disastrous for them.

Opaque though China may be in other respects, there should not be any difficulty reading China's ambitions right. China has been quite transparent about its ambitions.

## THE CHINA DREAM

Beijing's goals are explicit in the ethnonationalist narrative of "humiliation", "rejuvenation" and realising the "China Dream" by which the Communist Party legitimises its monopoly of power and right to rule China.

At its core, the China Dream is the recovery of the real or imagined place that China occupied before the Industrial Revolution and the tribulations that began with the Opium Wars that brought China down low.

Some version of this narrative has been used by Chinese reformers since the late Qing Dynasty. Mr Xi has used it more insistently than any of his predecessors and claimed that the party under his leadership has been more successful than any previous ruler in reversing the

humiliations that China has endured since the 19th century.

The China Dream is a powerful narrative because, although one can quibble over details, in its broad outline it is largely true. China's re-emergence as a major global and regional actor is an undeniable economic and geopolitical fact. In Mr Xi's version, the China Dream is intended to appeal not just to the Communist Party's supporters and

People's Republic of China (PRC) citizens, but also to "all Chinese". When Mr Xi says "all Chinese", he exploits the ambiguity of the several meanings of the term "Chinese" in the Chinese language to claim the loyalty of the race or nation defined ethnically not just territorially for his version of the China Dream. In effect, he is claiming that "all Chinese" should understand their interests in terms of China's interests, at least on issues that are of importance to China.

Internally, this narrative has been a success with most PRC citizens, at least those who are Han. Externally, it does resonate to some degree with the ethnic sentimentality of many overseas Chinese, including some Singaporeans. But "all Chinese" would certainly not agree with the role Mr Xi's China allots to them in his dream, particularly many in Hong Kong and almost all in Taiwan. In South-east Asia, where the overseas Chinese have not always been a welcome minority, it has sometimes placed them in an invidious position.

Some features of China's ambitions bear close analysis of their implications. To state my conclusion up front, while China's re-emergence as a major regional and global actor is undeniable, Beijing is nevertheless unlikely to realise its ambitions in their entirety because its ambitions contain certain internal contradictions which it will find difficult to overcome.

The China Dream is an essentially revanchist narrative. Broadly, it is about the recovery of what was lost. What is to be recovered is not just physical as in territory, but perhaps more importantly, status and the sense of self that arises from the place that China believes it once occupied internationally.

Of course, the world has changed and China has changed, and the dreams are not just nostalgic. They have been modified in accordance with these changes. They are global and not just regional. This is exemplified by Mr Xi's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI is still more a collection of projects wrapped up in a slogan than a coherent strategy. As its difficulties become evident, China has become less stridently triumphant about the BRI. But Mr Xi has embedded the BRI in the party's Constitution and it will not be abandoned. And practical or not, one cannot deny the grandeur of the dream.

Implicit in this revanchist-ethnonationalist narrative is the idea that all that happened to China in the 19th century and first half of the 20th century were aberrations from the normal order of things and therefore China's "rejuvenation" and the realisation of the China Dream are the restoration of the natural order. Professor Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University has even claimed that China's rise was "granted by nature".

It is this narrative that underpins China's extravagant claims in the East and South China seas. These are not claims that can be settled by diplomatic compromises or legal adjudication because they are presented as the righting of historical injustices and the restoration of the natural order of things.

## TREATY OF NERCHINSK

China is, of course, as pragmatic as any other state when its interests dictate it should be pragmatic. The greatest historical injustice inflicted on China in terms of loss of territory was the Treaty of Nerchinsk of 1689 by which China ceded huge swathes of territory in Siberia and the Far East to Czarist Russia. No less a personage than Mao Zedong once described this as a bill yet to be presented. But that did not prevent China settling its border disputes with Russia in 1999.

It is the very insignificance of the rocks, reefs and tiny artificial islands in the East and South China Seas that makes it possible for China to posture for the edification of its own people without too much risk of getting into a major conflict. Territories lost to Russia are unrecoverable without an unacceptable risk of conflict with a nuclear power which, moreover, is China's only partner of any strategic weight. But claims against smaller and weaker countries weigh some three orders of magnitude less than claims on the bare bones of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) legitimising narrative.

I do not want to press my point too far, but it seems evident that Chinese claims in the East and South China seas and the artificial islands it has created serve an important domestic purpose that is as, or perhaps even more, important as any geopolitical or strategic reason. In a war with the US, those artificial islands would be sopped in the first half hour, control of Tibet and Xinjiang, those vast non-Han areas whose status as part of China prior to the Qing Dynasty is debatable and are a constant source of insecurity.

China, as the empire it then was, was based on an entirely different idea of territoriality than China as the nation-state it became after contact with the West.

China's foremost priority – the most core of all its core interests –

is domestic: the preservation of internal stability and CPC rule. Since the 19th century, the legitimacy of every Chinese government – imperial, republican or communist – has depended on its ability to defend China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In this respect, external ambitions merge with internal imperatives into a seamless whole.

## A NEW SOCIAL COMPACT

For the last 30 years, the CPC's compact with the Chinese people was straightforward. In essence: I will improve your lives in return for obedience. The price was to tolerate inequality – some getting rich before others, to paraphrase Deng Xiaoping. Most Chinese were happy with the deal.

But inequality had grown too stark and had possibly become destabilising. At the same time, the limits of China's growth model of the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s were being reached. The need for a risk-free, steady but more equitable growth, could no longer be postponed.

All this was slowing growth. A new compact is now emerging under the slogan of "Common Prosperity" – slower but more equitable growth, in conjunction with tighter party control, stronger party discipline and stricter ideological adherence to Xi Jinping Thought. The penalties for non-compliance are harsh.

Emphasising control at a time when slower growth and competition with the US have raised the risks of social instability is perhaps only prudent. However, some basic questions remain unanswered: What will be the new drivers of growth and will they be compatible with tighter party control and ideological discipline? Will the Chinese people accept this new compact?

The Resolution on History adopted in November 2021 at the 6th Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC emphasises the continuity of the direction that Mr Xi has taken the party with China's long history and that China's future – in other words, the realisation of the China Dream – will be the inevitable outcome of his leadership and this historic process.

China's dynastic tradition thus melds into the historical prospect of Marxist dialectical materialism. Whatever I, Xi Jinping, choose to do – whether you understand it or not; whether you like it or not – will inexorably lead to this outcome that all right-thinking Chinese anywhere must welcome.

## MISCALCULATIONS AND MISTAKES

Will it work? Too early to tell, and we should not assume failure. What is certain is that as growth slows, the CPC is going to rely more on this revanchist-ethnonationalist

narrative in the coming years.

It is now clear that China miscalculated in prematurely abandoning Deng's sage approach of "hiding strength and biding time". From this flowed two other mistakes: believing that the decline of the US and the West generally was absolute and not just relative. This in turn led China into a foolish "no limits" partnership with President Vladimir Putin's Russia, the only major country that shares Mr Xi's distrust and contempt for the West.

These mistakes have led to a significant counter-reaction. Nobody is ever going to refuse to deal with China. But many surveys have shown that while China's importance and influence are widely acknowledged, it is not particularly trusted.

Today, one would be hard-pressed to identify any major economy and not a few not-so-major ones – including some very dependent on China – that are without some degree of concern about one aspect or another of Chinese behaviour.

Attitudes in the Global South towards China are generally more favourable, although not without their own anxieties about China. Cultivating the Global South has its merits, but the hard fact remains that in economics China's most important partners are, and for the foreseeable future will remain, in the Global North, which is also the source of the most serious potential security concerns for China.

It was not so much the brilliance of American diplomacy but the failure of Chinese diplomacy that created the Quad and AUKUS. The real architect of the emerging Indo-Pacific security architecture that China now decries as Cold War relics was Mr Xi.

The imperative to behave assertively, even aggressively, in situations where it is not in China's interests to be overly assertive, or even when it is counter-productive, is well-nigh hard-wired into the CPC's revanchist-ethnonationalist narrative.

## PRISONER OF ITS NARRATIVE

That narrative also makes the correction of mistakes fraught with political risk. I don't want to exaggerate the point, but the CPC is as much prisoner as master of the narrative it both uses and fears. China's revanchist-ethnonationalist narrative is infused with and fuelled by a strong sense of entitlement – because I have suffered humiliation, you owe me! Thus, not to behave assertively to reclaim what is owed to me or to admit that acting aggressively to reclaim what is mine is a mistake could be seen as a weakness that can raise awkward questions in the minds of the Chinese people. After all, if it is mine, why should I not insist on its recovery?

It is only a step from the Chinese

people criticising other countries for being so dim-witted or recalcitrant as to try to thwart the China Dream, to criticising the CPC for not being resolute enough in its response to those who oppose the China Dream. This could lead the CPC down some paths it does not really want to go, particularly on Taiwan.

Pursuing the China Dream compels the CPC to navigate a fine line. The CPC has generally found it safer to err on the harder side of that line, which in any case seems to be Mr Xi's natural inclination.

The concerns raised by the overly assertive behaviour of a big country cannot be erased by trade and investments or by talking glibly about a "community of common destiny for mankind" or Asian problems being solved by Asians or other anodyne slogans and hollow initiatives.

China's historical experience and political culture invest the idea of "community" with a strong element of hierarchy with China at the apex. The ideal order without hierarchy is alien to China. In this hierarchy, not all Asians are equal; nor are even all ethnic Chinese equal. Some are the Mandarins, others only the descendants of peasants who abandoned the motherland – occasionally useful but not quite equals.

Mr Xi has called on his officials to make China more "lovable", more "credible" and more "respectable" and to widen its circle of friends. This seems to me to be a tacit admission that Chinese diplomacy has been less than a stellar success. But those who hope for more than tactical changes after the 20th party congress should not hold their breath.

## THE THREAT TO SINGAPORE

For Singapore, the only ethnic Chinese-majority sovereign state outside Greater China, the idea that "all Chinese" should support the China Dream poses a uniquely serious – indeed existential – threat.

It is a direct attack on multiracial meritocracy, the principle around which we have organised our society since August 9, 1965, because it is an explicitly ethnic appeal to the majority of our population to extrapolate a demographic fact into the re-characterisation of Singapore as a "Chinese country".

Other more narrowly targeted ethnonationalist appeals from other countries to our minorities, to religious values, or to secular attitudes such as LGBT rights, do not pose quite the same danger because they do not attack the fundamental organising principle of our society.

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