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"CHINA'S DREAM NEEDS CHINESE POWER": THE NEW ERA IN XI'S THOUGHT

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There is a fourteen-day blank in Xi Jinping's biography that could provide meaningful hints about the man, his personality and his approach to power: in September 2012 – during the tense weeks before the 18th Party Congress in which he would have been appointed as the new head of state and leader of Chinese Communist Party – Xi Jinping completely disappeared from the public scene, was not mentioned in the official press, and even deserted some long-scheduled meetings with foreign dignitaries, including a summit with the then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Chinese officials declined any explanation for his absences, but speculations and rumours swirled across the Internet, the international press and in Beijing's most elusive circles. Although we will probably never know what really happened during those two weeks, there is an explanation that could fit both the accounts regarding Xi's personality and his decisions in the following years: in a move designed to send a stern signal to the battling

factions among the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping disappeared only because he had chosen to.

Today, six years after the Congress that crowned him leader and just a few days after the constitutional reform that allows him to keep his office even after a two-term mandate ends, this is the image that we should bear in our minds: the image of a man capable of stepping back from the position he pursued for most of his adult life and temporarily plunging into deep uncertainty both his allies and his rivals if the conditions to obtain leadership did not precisely correspond to the terms he had already dictated.

Concilia et Impera: today, to quote the definition made famous in 2009 by Prof. Cheng Li of the Brookings Institution, the Chinese Communist Party looks less and less like "A Team of Rivals". This, of course, does not mean that factional politics within the CCP are over, or that critics no longer have representation in the Party, but there is little doubt that the first five years of Xi's time in power

were spent mostly in consolidating his position far more than his predecessors, either by reducing critics to irrelevance or wiping them away through a ruthless anti-corruption campaign, an initiative that has taken its toll also in terms of economic growth.

Now that all the key roles – including top positions in the security and intelligence apparatus – are filled with loyalists, the “Chairman of Everything” can focus on “National Rejuvenation” (*guojia fuxing*), a political mission that could be defined as the ultimate goal of restoring China’s central role in the world.

In Xi Jinping’s vision, this goal can be achieved only through the CCP. As former Australian Prime Minister and China scholar Kevin Rudd recently pointed out in an extraordinary speech held at the US Military Academy at West Point, the Chinese leader is deeply convinced of the predominance of the Party over the administrative machinery of the state, which means that a trend inaugurated at the end of the 90s by then Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, and progressively weakened by its successors, is now completely reversed: the CCP will not confine itself to an ideological role, leaving the decision-making process to administrative entities like the State Council. Also, to wipe out any wishful thinking about this issue, the inner debate on whether the CCP could one day become a Western-style democratic party paving the way for some kind of “multi-party system with Chinese characteristics”, was already over in the early 2000’s, meaning that Xi Jinping now stands at the pinnacle of a stronger, more authoritarian Party, and with almost unprecedented powers.

Xi, a Marxist dialectician to the core, and therefore extremely well trained in the Hegelian discipline of “thesis, antithesis and syn-

thesis”, is well aware of the “inherent vice” within a country whose main priority consists of generating wealth and growth through the market without abdicating to authoritarian rule. Given the predominance of politics over economy in his thought, Xi Jinping’s solution to this dilemma lies in a further improvement of the Party’s role not only in state owned enterprises (SOEs), but also in the private sector: as Wang Xiaochuan, CEO of tech giant Sogou recently admitted in a candid comment, “we are entering an era in which we’ll be fused together. Probably there will be a request to establish a Party committee within your company. Private companies can resonate together with the State, but if it’s their nature to go their own way, they will find out that things are more painful than in the past”.

This approach also embodies a specific impact on China’s international relations: even if the Belt and Road Initiative – the huge infrastructure strategy that will improve commercial ties between 65 countries – has been saluted as a blessing, those who see Beijing as the new keeper of the free market are very likely to be disappointed. Xi Jinping himself has explicitly called for “a new type of international system” and “a new type of great power relation”, two statements foreshadowing a paradigm shift in international trade.

From a certain perspective, the Chinese Communist Party can be considered a software itself, a system whose algorithms need constant upgrades, and Xi Jinping – now with an indefinite time at his disposal – is injecting into this system code strings based on Marxism with Chinese characteristics and Confucianism.

Deng Xiaoping’s code strings were summarized in his “24 Character Strategy”: “Hide your strength, bide your time, and never take the

lead", while Xi Jinping's "38 Character Statement" goes by the motto "To realize the China Dream we must keep to the Chinese way, to realize the China Dream we must advance the Chinese spirit, to realize the China Dream

we must consolidate Chinese power". The differences between the two seem striking enough to affirm that we are about to enter a new era.