

From the CCP Dilemma to the Xi Jinping Dilemma: The Chinese Regime's Capacity for Governance

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This essay analyzes how the Fourth Plenary Session of the Nineteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), held in October 2019, furthered the concentration of power in the hands of party chief Xi Jinping, a concentration of power epitomized by the personification of party leadership over the party-state system. This took place against the background of a strengthening of the regime's capacity for governance, but the consequence has been an upgrading of the CCP's governance dilemma, which features unbalanced strength to promote economic growth and political stability on the one hand and to deal with the social, environmental, and public costs of development on the other hand, and Xi Jinping's governance dilemma, which involves overall control by the supreme leader as a result of the impotence of the regime and accordingly the institutional decay in present-day China. The COVID-19 crisis is the latest example of the overlapping of these two dilemmas.

The Chinese regime's capacity for governance presents a dilemma because it is strong in promoting economic growth, as demonstrated by the regime's performance during the reform era, but it is impotent in dealing with social and human-security issues, such as inequality and unsafe food.¹ Since the twenty-first century, an ongoing task for the Chinese leadership has been to improve the regime's capacity to govern. The latest, significant effort in this regard took place in late 2019, when the ruling elite of the CCP held the Fourth Plenary Session of the Nineteenth Central Committee on October 28–31. According to official CCP information, the theme of the session was “how to uphold and improve the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and advance the modernization of China's system and capacity for governance” by adopting a decision on “some major issues.”²

“The Fourth Plenary of the Nineteenth Central Committee was a significant meeting held as our party stands at the historical meeting point of realizing our ‘two centenary’ goals,” general secretary of the CCP Central Committee, Xi Jinping, boasted. China's official media celebrated the CCP document as they always do, but the praise given to this decision was unusually high and decisive. It was stated that the decision would be “a guideline for action and a political announcement, ... writing a new historical chapter for socialism with Chinese characteristics ... pointing out the clear direction for the great nation in the East that has one-fifth of the world's population,” and “contributing Chinese wisdom to the institutional civilization of human societies.”³

What does this Fourth Plenary of the Nineteenth Central Committee and its decision on governance capacity mean for Chinese politics and governance? Has the Chinese regime's

capacity for governance improved with implementation of the decision adopted by the plenary session? This essay will examine the answers to these two questions. It will first analyze the political and policy platform proposed by the Fourth Plenary Session of the Nineteenth Central Committee, and then it will explore the politics behind the meeting and the making of the decision. In the third section, the ongoing pandemic crisis of the novel coronavirus, originating in Wuhan, will be examined as an example to discuss how the dilemma of governance capacity has increased, rather than being remedied, by the politics and policy of the plenary session. This has resulted in the Xi Jinping governance-capacity dilemma, which is generally an upgraded version of the dilemma of the Chinese regime's governance capacity.

Governance Capacity as the Ruling Theme in CCP Leadership

How and why did governance capacity become the theme of the Fourth Plenary Session of the CCP's Nineteenth Central Committee? The short answer is: Xi Jinping personally decided upon the agenda and adopted the theme of the session. "I have pondered the theme of the Fourth Plenary Session for a long time," he told his aides who were responsible for drafting the plenum decision, "and I have also listened to the opinions of various segments of the society."⁴ Why did Xi eventually choose this theme? Xi emphasized an "institutional guarantee" for actualizing his "China Dream" of the rise of China while maintaining the CCP's ruling status for "one thousand years" (千秋). A wider perspective was also envisioned: "What is the matter with this world? Whither the world? In face of a future teeming with uncertainties, the world is fixing its eyes upon the secret of China's successes."⁵

With such political ambition, it is not surprising that the document is full of self-congratulations and, in some subtle ways, also expressions of anxiety about how to upgrade the CCP system in order to achieve its missions. Continuing its self-boasting, the plenum decision asserts that "The system of socialism with Chinese characteristics is a scientific system developed by the party and the people through their long-term practice and exploration." The plenary communiqué states that the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and China's system for governance, as proven by practice, are "systems of strong vitality and huge strength. These systems are able to push for the continuous progress of the country with nearly 1.4 billion people and ensure the realization of the two centenary goals toward the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which has been a civilization for more than 5,000 years."⁶

The decision summarizes thirteen "prominent advantages" of the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, ranging widely from the institutional features that the Chinese regime truly has, such as overall leadership by the CCP, promotion of economic development, and maintenance of unity to many features that are notoriously weak in the current Chinese system, including rule by the people, rule of law, ecological governance, and supervision over power.⁷ Because of such a strange and ironic mix, it is difficult to understand the decision, just like many other CCP documents, and to determine when the party is being honest and when it is being deceptive, and when the party is seriously determined to point out real troubles and when it simply intends to enforce its own propaganda. This is especially so for those readers who are not completely familiar with the reality of China.

So, did the plenum disclose what is the “secret of China’s successes”? Yes, but there is nothing new: it is the leadership of the CCP over everything—a point we will emphasize in the next section. In fact, this is not the first CCP Central Committee plenary session devoted to an elite discussion and then a decision to strengthen the regime’s capacity for governance in terms of maintaining its long-term position in power. Fifteen years ago, in September 2004, the Sixteenth Central Committee under Hu Jintao’s leadership held its Fourth Plenary Session, which adopted a decision on “strengthening the party’s capacity for long-term ruling.”⁸ The Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017 continued to address this theme by repeating the same sentence.

Additionally, the Fourth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee marked completion of the power transition from the earlier Jiang Zemin leadership to the Hu Jintao leadership, and on the occasion former General Secretary Jiang Zemin resigned from chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the incumbent, General Secretary Hu, took over the position.⁹

The 2019 plenum, however, did not mention anything about the 2004 plenum. Rather, it highlighted the Third Plenum of the CCP’s Eighteenth Central Committee, held in 2013 after Xi Jinping came to power, as the precedent for the 2019 plenum. It was reported that it was in 2013 that the CCP central leadership for the first time proposed the task of “promoting modernization of the system of state governance and governance capacity.”¹⁰ This ignorance of the contribution of the previous leadership is not in accordance with the CCP’s post-Mao norms, but rather it is similar to CCP practice during the Mao era. For Mao, history began with his seizure of power. Today, history seemingly began in 2012–13, with the ushering in of rule by Xi Jinping.

In comparison with the summary of the thirteen “prominent advantages” in the 2019 decision, the 2004 decision was much more moderate, as it emphasized capacity building in five respects. These include: the capacity for steering the socialist market economy, the capacity for developing socialist democratic politics, the capacity for building up a socialist advanced culture, the capacity for constructing a socialist harmonious society, and the capacity for managing international affairs.¹¹ Though like the 2019 document in terms of mixing reality with rhetoric while labeling everything in China “socialist,” the 2004 decision did not position the overall centralized leadership of the CCP as the first and most “prominent advantage” of the system. Of course, the Hu leadership had also stressed the upholding of CCP leadership, but its strength to do so obviously is much surpassed by that of the Xi leadership.

A Further Concentration of Power in Xi’s Hands: The Politics Inside and Outside of the Fourth Plenum

“Upholding the leadership of the party is the fundamental principle that the plenary decision follows,” the mouthpiece of the CCP announced. It states “the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party is the most essential feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics, is the most concentrated embodiment of the powerful vitality and great advantages of the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics.” “In the institutional system of socialism with Chinese characteristics that the plenary decision has systematically depicted, the institution of the party’s leadership is the basic institutional leadership of the state, and it is in command of and links up with (统领和贯穿) all other institutions.”¹²

These elaborations are helpful for readers to solve the difficulties previously noted to determine the purpose of the document and what amounts merely to pure nonsense. The plenary decision highlights thirteen tasks to strengthen the regime's governance capacity, and each of these tasks centers around CCP leadership. In fact, the concentrated, unified leadership (集中统一领导) of the CCP center is listed as the first task the party-state must accomplish to strengthen the regime's capacity for governance. The document mentions many kinds of organizations in China, including the people's congresses, the local governments, the people's consultative conferences, the supervisory organizations, the judicial organizations, the procuratorial organizations, the armed forces, mass organizations, enterprises and non-profit organizations, grassroots self-governance organizations, social organizations, and so forth, but ultimately it emphasizes the party's all-round leadership (全面领导) over them.¹³

Furthermore, in elaborating on the other tasks to strengthen its capacity for governance, the leadership of the CCP occupies a central position. For governance over culture, for example, most important is the party's "guidance of the direction of public opinion" (舆论导向). In terms of governance over foreign affairs and diplomacy, for the first time in a CCP public document, at least during the post-Mao era, that it is stated that the "great power of diplomacy rests in the hands of the party center" (外交大权在党中央), and then it repeats: "The party is in charge of the overall situation" in foreign affairs. For governance of the military, following an emphasis on the point that the military is under the leadership and command of the party center and it is the chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) who takes responsibility for implementing the CMC system (军委主席负责制), it states that CCP leadership must assert "absolute leadership in all domains and throughout all processes."¹⁴ There are many repetitive and even awkward expressions, but the point is very clear: The leadership of the party, the party center, and party chief Xi Jinping are the keys to strengthening the regime's capacity for governance.

What is buried in the political clichés and rhetorical repetitions thus becomes clear: the real "secret" of the 2019 Fourth Plenum is the parity of the leadership of the party, of the party center, and of party chief Xi Jinping. In other words, the leadership of the party is personified in the personal leadership of Xi Jinping. At the plenum, Xi was unquestionably the central person who performed all major functions on behalf of the Politburo, including delivering the work report of the Politburo, presenting an explanation of the draft decision, and making an "important speech at the session."¹⁵ He seemed to be the sole speaker on the rostrum, and none of the official news reports or the plenary communiqué mentioned any other speaker by name. Following the closing of the plenum, party media publicized some information concerning the preparatory work for the meeting by disclosing that Xi was the director of the document drafting group "in person," and that the drafting process that lasted for more than 200 "days and nights" and "from beginning to end always [was] under the direct leadership of General Secretary Xi Jinping."¹⁶

This personification of the leadership of the party has been a trend in Chinese politics since Xi came to power in 2012–13; it made further advances at the 2017 Nineteenth Party Congress and the 2018 National People's Congress (NPC) that amended the PRC constitution by omitting term limits for PRC president (Xi has occupied the position of president since 2013). Nevertheless, the

Fourth Plenary Session of 2019 actually strengthened Xi's authority over various unfavorable factors.

Since early 2019 China has faced some serious difficulties, including the long-term and large-scale protests in Hong Kong, China's trade war with the United States, the increasing international concern over and criticism of Beijing's brutal treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and the slowdown of Chinese economic growth. Xi Jinping has been under tremendous pressures and his capacity for governance has been widely questioned among Chinese elites as well as among Chinese citizens, though often only privately due to the regime's tight control and censorship over media outlets.

The unfavorable political circumstances facing Xi's leadership are the reason that Xi intentionally delayed the convening of the plenary meeting. The Third Plenary Session of the CCP's Nineteenth Central Committee, which was held in February 2018, decided to reorganize state administrative organizations with the appointment of state leaders for a new term. It was a follow-up of the Second Plenary Session of the Nineteenth Central Committee, which took place in January 2018 and that decided to adopt an amendment to the state constitution. The two plenary sessions indicated a new height in Xi's concentration of power. Facing the above-mentioned serious difficulties, however, elite and social resistance to Xi and his political programs gathered new momentum. Therefore, the Fourth Plenum was widely expected to be a venue where both the discontent against Xi and Xi's tighter hold over party organizations might be utilized to make some political gains.

As Xi has legitimate power in agenda-setting, of course he would not allow the plenum to be held until he had gained an upper hand over the above difficulties. As a result, this was the longest interval between formal Central Committee meetings since 1987, when the Thirteenth Central Committee under reform-minded party chief Zhao Ziyang regularized the Central Committee meeting schedule by increasing the frequency of plenary sessions to twice a year. The post-Tiananmen CCP leadership had reduced the frequency of the plenums to once per year. Thus, it is obviously quite unusual that the Fourth Plenum was not held until some twenty months after the Third Plenum.

When the Fourth Plenum was finally convened, Xi was already well prepared to strengthen his own power and authority, and the plenum became an important occasion for Xi to mute internal discontent. Thus, the Fourth Plenum was a single-actor show by Xi who attracted all the limelight, and the plenum communiqué highlighted that the session "fully affirmed the work of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee since the Third Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, acknowledging its endeavors that led to major achievements in various causes of the Party and the country despite complicated situations marked by increasing risks and challenges at home and abroad."¹⁷

A rumor was widely reported by Chinese-language social media and overseas outlets that the forthcoming plenum would select Xi's successors; the designated heirs would be Chen Min-er (陈敏尔), party secretary of Chongqing, and Vice Premier Hu Chunhua (胡春华), and these two youngest Politburo members would be added to the Politburo Standing Committee. This might have effectively reduced the political pressure on Xi because much internal discontent had

been aroused by Xi's intention to restore life tenure for himself (as signaled by the decision to amend the state constitution at the Second Plenum of February 2018).¹⁸ It would also help shift the focus of elite attention to the forthcoming plenum. However, such a personnel change did not materialize, and such non-action indicated that Xi had been able to avoid becoming a lame duck and, accordingly, he would very likely stay in power beyond the next party congress, which, if norms are followed, will be held in 2022.

Xi's Concentration of Power and the CCP's Capacity for Governance Tested: The COVID-19 Crisis as the Latest Example

Thus, approval of the decision of the Fourth Plenum was regarded as a new achievement for Xi to further concentrate power in his own hands and to avoid even the slightest discontent to curb his power. This is not unusual because the CCP believes that the concentration of power in the party, in the party center, and in the hands of the powerful party leader is the best way to deal with challenges and difficulties, or, in its own fashionable terms, to strengthen the regime's capacity for governance.

This is not an entirely mistaken belief, especially given the two miracles claimed by the Fourth Plenum, namely, the miracle of (economic) development and the miracle of (political) stability—CCP media reminded readers that this was the first time a party plenary document presented a narrative about such “two miracles,” and the miracles forcefully supported the CCP's claim of institutional vitality and governance capacity.¹⁹

Such a logic of positive feedback, however, ignores the historical fact that it was decentralization, not centralization, that initiated the post-Mao reforms in China and led to improvements in the economic efficiency of the system. It also neglects the price and costs that China and the world have paid for the two miracles—price and costs ranging widely across many crucial aspects of human life, including economic equality, social justice, environmental quality, as well as the civic and political rights of citizens.

Sounding an alarm due to such institutional and political ignorance, a series of human and domestic-animal pandemics erupted in China in 2019, including African swine fever that, according to the Chinese government's own statistics (which usually underreport disasters), had killed more than one million pigs by late April 2019.²⁰ The most disastrous outbreak of a pandemic took place in December 2019, caused by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19, or popularly referred to as Wuhan pneumonia, as it originated in Wuhan, a metropolitan city of 11 million in central China). As this essay is being written, the COVID-19 pandemic is still rapidly spreading widely throughout the entire country, as well as in the world, creating a global public health crisis of monumental proportions.

The origin of the fatal virus is a mystery, but some people have attributed its spread to human actions or human mistakes. Although this is highly debatable, it is certain that the Chinese government's extreme and intentional delay of disclosing the outbreak of the virus must be blamed for its disastrous spread.²¹ In fact, the Chinese government is notorious for its habit of covering up human disasters and prohibiting such media coverage, as revealed during the 2002–3 SARS crisis. Prior to the COVID-19 virus in 2019, the Chinese government had already

prohibited news reports about the August spread of African swine fever despite the rise in a wave of the animal pandemic that followed.²² The outbreak of COVID-19 likely occurred on December 1, 2019, but the government delayed publicizing it until as late as January 23, 2020. During these crucial 54 days, the regime detained at least eight medical workers and charged them with “fabricating rumors to stir up social order,” because they had disclosed occurrence of the epidemic via their WeChat group communications.²³

The Chinese regime might have had various reasons to move extremely slowly in publicizing the outbreak, but all evidence points to one major cause: all cadres had to wait for Xi Jinping’s “in-person” instructions before taking any action, because Xi took charge of the issue (as well as all other issues), in his own words, “in person.”²⁴ Aside from the controversy regarding responsibility, this clearly highlights a problem due to the high concentration of power in the hands of the supreme leader in terms of the capacity for governance. If the supreme leader does not respond, the regime is completely impotent to do anything, and not until the supreme leader’s instructions are issued can the system be powerfully mobilized.

In the Chinese context, this can be called Xi Jinping’s governance dilemma. Prior to Xi’s extreme concentration of power, the regime had operated for decades under oligarchic leaders, which in limited ways allowed the central party-state machine, the departmental administrative bureaucracy, the local authorities, the governments at the grassroots level, and even some social organizations to take some initiative in dealing with various governance issues. Of course, as indicated at the outset of this essay, such an oligarchic authoritarian system allowed for economic growth and political stability, but the system was incapable of dealing with the costs of such growth and stability. Now, the effects of the presence of both dilemmas—Xi Jinping’s dilemma and the CCP’s dilemma—have resulted in a rapid decay of the regime’s capacity for governance rather than leading to an improvement in such a capacity. The outbreak of COVID-19 can be traced to the regime’s governance dilemma, and the regime’s impotence in terms of dealing with the spread of the disease can be traced to Xi Jinping’s governance dilemma.

Concluding Remarks

The Chinese Communist regime’s capacity for governance lies in its strength to monopolize public power, but a monopoly of power can produce a series of serious and even fundamental challenges to governance, especially governance of a society with a market economy, some social plurality, and global engagement. This authoritarian dilemma was furthered by the Xi Jinping leadership after Xi came to power; and the Fourth Plenum of the CCP’s Nineteenth Central Committee, held in October 2019, epitomized an upgrading of the CCP’s dilemma to become Xi Jinping’s own dilemma in terms of capacity for governance. It is an upgrading in terms of the degree of concentration of power, as Xi’s authority and power now overwhelm that of the party center, and the previously claimed collective leadership of the Politburo Standing Committee has been replaced by a personal dictatorship by Xi. This represents an institutional decay, however, because it is not feasible for the CCP, as a huge political party with more than 90 million members, and the giant country of China to rely on only one person, regardless of how capable this person might be. The CCP dilemma regarding its capacity for governance may allow for the rise of the so-called China model, which means the CCP’s monopoly of power enjoys some advantages in terms of governance, especially in terms of promoting economic

development and maintaining political stability, though inevitably tremendous costs are incurred. But if the Xi Jinping regime is unable to solve this dilemma, the stability of the regime will be threatened. In essence, the Xi Jinping dilemma implies that the more Xi's power is concentrated, the more the regime's capacity for governance will be weakened.



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