China in the crisis of (de)globalization

Wednesday 29 March 2023, by International Viewpoint, ROUSSET Pierre (Date first published: 29 March 2023).

The world that allowed the Chinese economy to take off and expand internationally is no more. Sino-American tensions are sharpening against the backdrop of the crisis of commercial (de)globalization. At the meeting of the National People's Congress, Xi Jinping confirmed his grip on the central organs of the Chinese Communist Party, but he is facing a deteriorating economy. He met with "his best friend" Vladimir Putin in Moscow, engaging further in the Eurasian crisis, at the risk of losing some of his stakes in Europe. Behind this diplomatic display and a facade of unanimity, the regime is faced with a problematic situation, both internally and internationally.

International Viewpoint - How do you perceive the "present moment" in China?

Pierre Rousset - A destabilizing acceleration of the changes underway both domestically and internationally. The National People's Congress (NPC) met for nine days, ending on Monday 13 March. Two highlights are worth noting: Xi Jinping was re-elected for a third term as president of the People's Republic, which is obviously not a surprise, but he was re-elected unanimously, which is unusual. Xi is thus demonstrating his willingness to lead the party, the army and the state unmitigated. Second, the NPC approved a growth target of 5% for the coming year. This is very low (with no certainty of reaching it) and means an increase in unemployment and social inequality. Internally, the regime has to regain control of the country, which is in a crisis with deep-seated causes.

On the international level, the signals are contradictory. The geostrategic confrontation between Washington and Beijing is hardening, but for transnational capital, business must continue unhindered, as evidenced by the visit of Tim Cook, head of Appel, to Beijing where he was received with all honors. This visit is all the more significant as the firm paid dearly last year for the deadly "failures" of Xi Jinping's Covid policy and is trying to reduce its dependence by relocating part of its production, but the importance of the Chinese market cannot be ignored, nor the advantages of the economic ecosystem that China offers to investors.

The Putin war in Ukraine and the US Asian refocusing have placed the Chinese regime before difficult choices. Xi Jinping's recent visit to Moscow sanctions a significant shift in its positioning in the global geopolitics of military conflicts and tensions. It allows us to (attempt to) take stock of Russian-Chinese relations and their impact in Eurasia, in particular. The geostrategic conflict between China, a rising power, and the United States, an established power, has entered a new, critical phase.

China's economic development and international rise were intrinsically linked to its place in the international division of labor and neoliberal globalization. This time is over. We have moved from the crisis of market globalization to the insoluble crisis of capitalist deglobalization.

So let’s say that the “present moment” of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), since it is its Standing Committee of the Political Bureau (under Xi’s tight control) that decides everything, is… indecisive.

The global consequences of this situation are unfortunately clear, such as the brutal aggravation of the climate crisis or the increasing militarization of the world.

What does Xi Jinping’s visit to Moscow tell us?

The question was raised last year whether the invasion of Ukraine was the prelude to a Chinese attack on Taiwan - a true Sino-Russian alliance with the opening of two fronts in the west and east of Eurasia, taking on the then politically divided and militarily unprepared NATO countries. This was not the case, and in retrospect it can be said that Beijing was not in a position to attempt the Taiwanese adventure, for many reasons. Xi could not, but probably did not want a war that would involve the United States head-on.

The Ukrainian conflict has endangered Chinese political and economic interests in Europe and more generally in the West. This is not a detail. Yet, as much a “big brother” as he is, Xi Jinping was unable to influence the course of the Putin war. A year later, he went to Moscow and put on display their unwavering friendship, despite the many bones of contention and rivalries that mar it. In this “present moment”, it is first of all a rather spectacular gesture of support for Putin, shortly after the issuance of an arrest warrant against the latter by the International Criminal Court of Justice accusing him of war crimes for “illegal deportation” of Ukrainian children. We are “the best of friends” they jointly proclaimed.

In February 2022, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine put China on the spot. Beijing never condemned Moscow for the invasion, but like all capitals, the CCP leadership took the time to observe the developments and became concerned. The balance sheet was severe: failure of the “special operation” in the face of Ukrainian national resistance, extreme brutality of the occupying forces (including against Russian-speaking populations), revitalization of NATO paralyzed since the Afghan debacle, return of the United States to the European scene…

By Putin’s own admission, pressure (potential and not immediate) from NATO was not the only justification for the invasion: he denied the country’s right to exist and wanted to restore the borders of the Tsarist Empire or the Stalinist USSR (an objective that worries other Eastern European countries). In doing so, he broke Beijing’s official credo of respect for international borders, while the recurrent use of the nuclear threat violated one of the major taboos of Chinese diplomacy…

Beijing had invested considerably economically and diplomatically in Ukraine, Eastern and Western Europe, weaving a vast network of influence. A key part of its “new silk roads”. It was therefore risking a lot. Xi did not want to break with Russia or lose his stake. Hence his cautious position, including at the UN, on the Ukrainian crisis.

Xi’s trip breaks with previous caution. It does reflect a significant adjustment in the priorities of the Chinese Communist Party, even though it is obviously still seeking to limit the cost of its support for Russia in Europe (with the help, he hopes, of the German and French heads of state). Following the hardening of the confrontation with Washington, its geostrategic priorities are now located in Asia: the South China Sea and Taiwan, the Pacific… From this point of view, the continuation of the war in Ukraine has become a good thing for the Chinese regime: it serves as a stopper - the more arms, finances and troops Washington dedicates to the European front, the more it will have to limit the extent of its repositioning in the Indo-Pacific area.

How to qualify Sino-Russian relations?

Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin signed a “joint declaration on deepening the comprehensive strategic coordination partnership of the new era”. The important words here seem to me to be “comprehensive” and “era” (new), which sanction a so-called “limitless” alliance. This formula (“without limits”) had already been used shortly before the invasion of Ukraine, and then had fallen more or less into disuse. Here it is again, in force. It seems to me that it is a sign of the formalization of a Sino-Russian bloc with a strategic vocation that is more consistent than it has been up to now, but still as unequal as ever.

The Sino-Russian relationship is very asymmetrical and the two countries are not on an equal footing, far from it. This is obvious. During his stay in Moscow, Xi behaved like a benevolent emperor and Putin like an obsequious vassal. I would only like to qualify this evidence by noting that the CCP needs this partnership. Its nightmare is to find itself militarily alone against the United States. It needs an ally that counts in this field, and there is no other choice than Russia.

He also does not want to face new hostile governments on his borders. Whatever he thinks of Putin (or of Kim Jun-un in North Korea), Xi cannot take the risk of seeing his regime collapse. He has therefore given Putin strong support for his re-election to the presidential elections of 2024! This helps to boost the diplomatic credibility of the Kremlin’s host, who *needs* it badly. Xi invites Putin to international meetings in China which will allow him to speak (under Chinese patronage) with many heads of state, without the risk of being worried by the International Criminal Court.

If there is one subject on which Xi Jinping is fussy, it is military nuclear power. Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin has just announced that he will deploy “tactical” nuclear weapons in Belarus and build a nuclear weapons depot there... A new provocation to the West, but also to his friend Xi.

What about the economic field?

The Chinese and Russian economies are in many ways complementary, with China exporting goods or capital and importing products from the Siberian subsoil, including, of course, low-cost oil and gas, which the reduction in Western imports has "liberated. China is now the first trade partner of Russia, which is, for its part, only the eleventh partner of Beijing (however, its exports are significantly increasing since 2022). An exemplary case of unequal trade. Nevertheless, once again, Beijing *needs* Russia, in the field of energy, or minerals, in particular. Xi Jinping does not seem to want to put all his cards in Russian hands. He is turning to Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Middle Eastern oil, to avoid depending too much on the Russian manna.

To understand the importance of the “partnership” with Russia, from Beijing’s point of view, one must take into account their proximity and their geographical complementarity. Proximity: these two countries share a common border, which allows for secure trade, an insurance in case international trade is disrupted by a geopolitical (or health) crisis. Complementarity: China is off-center in Eurasia. With Russia, it weighs in the whole continent. To the west, but also to the north. It does not border the Arctic seas. Russia, as a Siberian power, should enable it to engage in the (fierce) competition for the Great North that climate change, the thawing of the polar regions and their sea lanes are announcing.

The Sino-Russian bloc remains, however, conflicting. Putin dreams of restoring the borders of the Tsarist Empire or of the Stalinist USSR? It is the Chinese influence that is asserting itself in Central Asia, in countries that are precisely part of this historical perimeter. It is a region of major importance as much for its resources as for its geographical situation: it occupies a pivotal place between Siberia, the Middle East, South Asia and China - the obligatory passage of economic or military communication axes. During his stay in Moscow, Xi Jinping announced the upcoming organization of a China-Central Asia summit to which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are invited. Here is Russia marginalized, the price that Moscow must pay for Chinese support. Let's bet that it will not be the only one. The bulk of the Russian army is concentrated in the West and this suits Beijing very well, which also has some territorial accounts to settle with his "best friend" in Northeast Asia.

China, mediator in the Ukrainian conflict?

China is not a neutral third power, offering its good offices to negotiate a political solution to the Ukrainian crisis. Not only does it provide decisive support to Moscow, but it is also a stakeholder in the geostrategic conflict that is being played out in Eurasia around this war and does not hide it. The 12-point plan presented by Xi Jinping is consistent with this state of affairs. It defends the principle of respect for international borders and the UN order, but does not say that Moscow has violated it. In fact, it contains no specific demands on Russia - which is why Putin was able to claim that he agreed with the plan. The official Chinese media faithfully reproduce the Russian narrative about the causes of the war: an ac*t of self-defence against NATO. They also published a long note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating: "Whether there is a crisis in Ukraine or not, the Chinese and Russian leaders will maintain exchanges and visits (...) The United States wants to intensify the tension in the Taiwan Strait."The only one who can solve the [Ukrainian] problem and the one who created it. The key to solving the Ukrainian crisis is not in the hands of China, but in the hands of the United States and the West.*" (quoted by Frédéric Lemaire and Nicolas Ruisseau in *Le Monde* dated March 22, 2023, translated from the French). There are more convincing ways to present oneself as a mediator...

The 12-point plan has mainly a political and diplomatic function. In this respect, it is probably effective. Twenty years ago, in 2003, the United States (and its allies) invaded Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, blithely violating international law on the basis of false accusations and gross manipulation of world public opinion. Iraq is still paying the price of this dirty war. By doing so, George W. Bush has destroyed the legalistic and democratic credentials of the US government. Moscow and Beijing are now benefiting from this loss of credit.

The question of a cease-fire nevertheless arises...

The cost paid by the Ukrainian population in this war is truly distressing, and I am distressed, but a cease-fire is not decreed from outside. It comes into being when the warring parties judge that they need it. This is not the case with Putin, who is preparing the spring offensive, not for truce, provided of course that he has enough weapons to do so (will see). This is not the case with Zelensky either, it seems. The winter cold did not get the better of the Ukrainian population, despite the terrible Russian bombing campaign. Kyiv hopes that more and better Western military aid will enable him to take the initiative on several key fronts in the coming months.

Giving the big powers a hand in defining the terms of a truce usually goes wrong. This is what was done in 1954 concerning Vietnam. The promised elections, which the Vietminh would have won, did not take place, and the United States took over from the French, with the US military escalation leading to an all-out war, unparalleled, I believe, in its devastating nature. The situation in North-East Asia also shows what a truce situation can lead to without the signing of a lasting peace: the most acute nuclear crisis in the world.

As far as we are concerned, I think that the essential thing is to listen to what the components of the Ukrainian left are asking us and to do everything we can to act accordingly in international solidarity. For the time being, the message is that a major defeat on the Russian army must inflicted, in order to open up a perspective of lasting peace. It is not up to us to build peace plans.

How to characterize the conflict between the United States and China?

An established power, the United States, is confronted with a new rising power, China, to the point that this inter-imperialist face-off is now a structuring element of the world geostrategic situation. A classic case, but with a background that is not at all classic...

A "new cold war"?

... I was going to explain why the background of the Beijing-Washington conflict is not "classical" - and why the formula "new cold war" seems to me to be misleading. At the time of the Cold War, the degree of economic interdependence between the East-West blocs was minimal. Today it is very close. The global context is radically different from what it was half a century ago, and we cannot understand anything about the present situation without taking this into account. To do this, it is best to avoid using the same terms.

Before coming back to this, I would like to note that at the time of the confrontation between the East-West "blocs", the formula of "Cold War" reflected a narrow Eurocentric viewpoint. The war in Asia was not "cold" at all, leading to the US escalation in Indochina. Ironically, the "new Cold War" is being invoked today... even though Europe is the scene, at its heart, of the most violent military conflict since 1945. A war waged with the means of a great power (Russia), unlike the conflicts that tore the Balkans apart.

It is inevitable that mainstream media, pundits and political scientists talk about a new Cold War today, but that is no reason to do so. Words matter and carry assumptions that can contribute to obliterating reality. The phrase "Cold War" has a strong mental charge that invites a very dated geopolitical interpretation. This is all the more problematic as many left-wing currents continue to side, more or less frankly, with, or even behind, Russia and China, in the name of the fight against the United States. The imaginary of the Cold War therefore suits them perfectly. As, symmetrically, it suits Joe Biden and currents that advocate alignment with Washington in the name of "Western democratic values".

It is not enough to explain, in the texts, the difference between periods or the complexity of contemporary geostrategic situations. It is also necessary to choose a more adequate vocabulary.

To know ?

Inter-imperialist conflict: this is what it is all about, and saying so makes the difference with the past geopolitical "model" immediately perceptible. The background is the legacy of neoliberal globalization, i.e. an unprecedented degree of world market integration in which China has occupied a nodal place. Beijing and Washington are now engaged in a geostrategic confrontation that extends to all domains: military, alliance systems, economic sanctions, development of alternative technologies, control of supplies of scarce resources... It is indeed a question of reconstituting "camps", but this political dynamic comes up against economic realities. These two countries are linked to each other in many ways and, perhaps even more importantly, both are dependent on a global organization of production that makes it very difficult to relocate key companies massively and quickly, especially to their countries of origin, in the context of a global war economy (more or less cold, more or less hot).

The deindustrialization of the West is proving to be very complicated to overcome. Although this de-industrialization has primarily benefited China, it is not as self-sufficient. The example of the semiconductor sector is symptomatic. Semiconductors can be found almost everywhere. Whoever produces the highest quality integrated circuits has a decisive advantage, especially in military matters. The licenses for semiconductors are generally American, but their manufacture is based in Asia: Taiwan, South Korea… (a bit in the Netherlands)… countries that are geographically vulnerable to their Chinese neighbor. Beijing devotes considerable funds to research in this field, but catching up is not a foregone conclusion. Joe Biden passed a mammoth budget to set up a production center in the United States with the help of a Taiwanese firm, TSMC. Very few firms have the technology and know-how to engrave ultra-miniaturized microchips.

There are many obstacles to relocation. As we can see with Apple - India is not a substitute for China - as for producing in the United States itself… The Biden administration is now confronting the firms that count with a binary choice: you will receive massive aid to ensure your relocations to the United States on the condition that you leave the Chinese market. You cannot have your cake and eat it too… This random tug-of-war illustrates that we are no longer living in the “cold war” era!

And what are relocations worth if the production chains, the so-called value chains, remain globalized as they are now? Their disruption, whether due to a health or geopolitical crisis, has immediate effects. A finished product like a car contains a very large number of components from multiple countries. If one is missing and cannot be replaced, production stops. The Covid-19 crisis showed this. *The same is true for the military industry.*

The choice of globalization has allowed capital to expand almost without hindrance on the international level, to optimize its profits, to ensure its domination, to organize the production chains accordingly. And now the main imperialist states want to reactivate the borders, or even add to them. This is an unprecedented and very contradictory situation.

There would be an alternative to the crisis of capitalist de-globalization: a policy of regionalization for the benefit of the populations and the fight against the climate crisis (with, in particular, the consequent reduction of transport). This alternative must be popularized, but the social forces capable of imposing it remain to be built…

The crisis of capitalist deglobalization is here to stay. Its consequences for China are major. This is one of the main reasons why the Chinese regime cannot hope to regain the conditions that previously ensured its centrality in the world market and its geopolitical rise.

What are the other conditions?

I will mention two of them here.

It was not Xi Jinping who created the domestic preconditions for China’s takeoff. First, the country had to be independent, with an educated population and workforce, and its own first industrial base. This is the legacy of the 1949 revolution (one would tend to forget this, given the convulsions in which the Maoist regime sank). It was then under Deng Xiaoping that the marching wing of the Chinese bureaucracy succeeded in piloting a bourgeois (counter)revolution, the formation of a new composite bourgeoisie combining (notably through family networks) bureaucratic capital and private capital. Finally, it was under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao that integration into the world market was consolidated. Xi Jinping showed great ingratitude when he publicly humiliated Hu Jintao at the last CCP congress.

On the international level, Xi Jinping has benefited from an unexpected window of opportunity: the prolonged impotence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific. Bogged down in the Middle East, Obama was unable to reverse the pivot of the US power in the Asia-Pacific. Erratic, Trump has worried the traditional allies of the US and left the field wide open to Beijing, including on the economic front, while initiating the policy of sanctions. It was not until Joe Biden that, in the wake of the Afghan debacle, managed to regain the initiative in this part of the world. In the meantime, Beijing had militarized the South China Sea, to its own benefit and at the expense of the other riparian countries.

Nevertheless, China's international expansion continues…

Yes, especially in Latin America, the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Sponsoring a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran is an undeniable success that must not have pleased Washington! On the other hand, Beijing has suffered setbacks in the South Pacific and East Asia, i.e., in its perimeter of influence and its immediate security zone. This is rather paradoxical. These setbacks signal the return of the United States to the region, but they are also due to the policies of Xi Jinping himself. He trampled on the rights of the countries bordering the South China Sea, thinking that they would be too economically dependent on Chinese investment, financing and market to rebel. He has pulled too hard on the rope.

More generally, the new geopolitics of conflict is making its mark. The Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, went to Kyiv at the same time as Xi Jinping was in Moscow. This is not a simple act of obedience to Washington, he has his own agenda: to assert Japan's weight in the concert of great powers, to complete the reconstitution of an intervention army, to put an end to the pacifist culture still prevalent among the Japanese population and militarize the regime, to defend the interests of its own imperialism in North-East Asia (the Korean peninsula, territorial claims ...). Sheltering the main American bases abroad, in Okinawa for the most part, by going to Ukraine, he also sends a message to China concerning Taiwan.

Here we find the same tension between geostrategic dynamics and economic interdependencies, which in this case are very strong: China was (in 2019) Japan's second largest trading partner, on a par with the United States. For China, Japan remained the first foreign investor, outside the Chinese world, and the third recipient of Chinese exports, behind the United States and the European Union.

After the Marcos clan returned to power, Manila doubled the number of ports the U.S. Navy will be allowed to use. The Philippines will probably be asked to stockpile ammunition that is used extensively in contemporary conflicts.

China seemed to be the master of the military game in its immediate periphery, apart from the conquest of Taiwan, but the configuration of forces is gradually being rebalanced, at least partially.

There is a risk of finding ourselves in a dangerous, prolonged situation of "neither war nor peace" in the South China Sea, with peaks in military, economic (blockade) and diplomatic tensions.

Chinese military equipment is still partly of Russian origin. Beijing is closely observing the performance of the occupying army in Ukraine, compared to the effectiveness of the US support to the Ukrainian forces. Xi Jinping has some concerns. The quality of Russian weaponry appears to be far below its reputation. On the other hand, the quality of the information provided by the Pentagon to the Ukrainian General Staff explains the precision with which it was able to target its operations. It is true that the Chinese military-industrial complex is mobilized at full speed and is modernizing its arsenal and developing its own technologies, but we have not yet seen them at work. Beijing still seems to be dependent on Russia in certain areas and decided to cooperate with Moscow in this field during Xi Jinping's visit.

Does Beijing defend a multipolar world?

This is what it says, with one voice, but it has many voices. Xi Jinping has made no secret of his hegemonic ambitions, opposing two models of civilization on a planetary scale, with China having to regain its centrality and history finding its natural course after a Western parenthesis. “The 21st century will be Chinese,” he proclaimed.

To some extent, the world is now multipolar. The US hegemony of the aftermath of the Second World War is no more. From India to Qatar, from Turkey to Brazil, each state has the latitude to defend the interests of (part of) its dominant classes (unless it is plunged into a regime crisis that paralyses it). Thus, the United States and China have difficulty in forming a single alliance block uniting their allies.

NATO’s march to the East was interrupted by the Afghan debacle. Indeed, in June 2022, for the first time, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan were invited to attend the NATO summit in Madrid, where China was explicitly identified as a threat to common collective security. Indeed, NATO’s mandates would allow it to intervene wherever it deems the “security” of its members to be in question.

However, for the time being, Joe Biden must activate various ad hoc political-military agreements in the Asia-Pacific region, likely to accommodate the requirements of each: the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) with Australia, India and Japan… or Aukus, an acronym for Australia, United Kingdom and United States.

China activates networks such as the BRICS, the acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. However, I do not see the BRICS becoming a military alliance, even if Brazil is currently making eyes at Beijing. The same is true of the economic cooperation networks in the Asia-Pacific region, which include states (such as Europeans) that are committed to the United States.

My “reading” here differs from progressive analyses that judge that the realignment of forces (states or large economic enterprises) around Washington or Beijing is occurring at an accelerated pace. I rather perceive a slow tearing apart that may never end. This being said to provide food for thought and discussion among us…

There is nothing slow, however, in the planetary impact of Sino-American tensions. It is already considerable: the militarization of the world, the acceleration of the climate crisis… *It is this militarization dynamic that must be tackled*, and it will not be done by siding with one or the other of the protagonists - with the United States because Chinese power is autocratic, or with China because it does not bear historical responsibility for the imperial order defended by the NATO countries…

By siding with one of the powers, we find ourselves trapped in this dynamic of militarization of the world and we risk being led to abandon to their fate populations that are victims of one imperial order or another: the Palestinians, victims of the support given by the United States to Israel, the Syrians, victims of the support of Russia to the Assad regime, the Burmese, victims of the Chinese support to the military junta…

Our “angle of view” is the defense of the rights of peoples (including the right to self-determination) - as well as the defense of fundamental human and social rights everywhere. The defense of rights is not a “Western value”. We have experienced the worst regimes in the West, such as Nazism, and these hard-won rights are now under attack from France to Italy to the United States.

Shouldn’t we fight for workers’ rights, associative and trade union freedoms, women’s rights everywhere in the world? For the rights of immigrants, freedom of movement and expression, the right to vote in meaningful elections? The right to choose one's sexuality, one's identity, to control one's body, to abortion?

The geopolitical analysis of the present should not serve to relativize the struggle for rights or to obscure the origin of conflicts, such as the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the military crushing of a vast movement of civic disobedience in Burma, the invasion of Iraq by a coalition under US hegemony... We must not forget either that Taiwanese do live in Taiwan and that they have the right to freely decide their future, without being subjected to recurrent military threats, to economic retaliation, to the manipulation of public opinion.

Isn't this internationalism?

Is the inter-imperialist war inevitable?

Who am I to answer such a question! I'll give my... feeling anyway.

It seems that for many analysts, the only outstanding question would be its date: very soon, later? I hope that these political scientists, more knowledgeable than me, are wrong. The war in Ukraine has global repercussions, but will not develop into a world war (unless it becomes nuclear). On the other hand, a conflict in the South China Sea would probably not be a simple proxy war. We can learn a lot from Ukraine in terms of contemporary military history, but it does not tell us what a major conflict between the two main imperialisms would be like. Except for an unmitigated disaster.

The business community does not believe in the proximity of war - it continues to invest in the long term, Chinese companies in the West (most recently in the mining sector in Australia) and Western companies in China. It is reluctant to cut itself off from a part of the world market (including China).

War is possible, it can happen "despite everything", but it is not inevitable. Its possibility, however, creates a situation of major insecurity that weighs on consciences. Our political response is obviously the development of the anti-war movement. This is also our problem, as it remains weak on the international level and divided between "campists" and "internationalists".

Let's go back to the situation in China itself

Xi Jinping has begun, after the CCP congress last year and now with the meeting of the National People's Congress, his third term at the head of the party, the army and the state. A point of no return has been reached. Prior to the constitutional reform that Xi imposed in 2018, terms of office for supreme leaders were limited to two consecutive five-year terms. A golden rule that had been respected by the two successors of Deng Xiaoping: Jiang Zemin (1992-2002) and Hu Jintao (2002-2012).

The 2018 constitutional reform lifted all restrictions on the length of terms of office, so that Xi Jinping can rule as long as he wants and can. The symbolic charge of the NPC meeting is that - China has entered not just one-party rule, but one-leader rule (with unparalleled thinking). This is a real regime change. Xi has attacked the measures initiated by Deng Xiaoping to limit the monopolization of power sine die by a single faction, a single clique, a single man. It is true that before Xi, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had already held the three key positions of head of the party, the army and the state simultaneously. However, they had to respect a certain collegiality at each level of leadership and prepare for the accession to power of a new team.

The succession was therefore the subject of a long struggle within the apparatus, which allowed different factions to win and imposed compromises (from which Xi benefited). This was necessary when the terms of office could not exceed ten consecutive years. This is no longer the case.

Collegiality is over, and even at 70, a leader for life rarely prepares his or her succession.

However, if Xi does control the heart of political power within the CCP, from the Central Committee to the holy of holies, the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau, what is the reality in a party with 96 million members? In a country-continent of one billion four hundred million people?

Is China a "normal" capitalist country?

Yes, but no. Let's take the example of Covid-19. The regime first locked itself into the denial, losing any chance of nipping the epidemic in the bud (and avoiding the pandemic). Reacting too late, it had to resort to "hard" containment policies, which initially enjoyed popular support. It started to decontain for economic reasons and the exit from containment was unprepared, even though, under these conditions, it was going to provoke a virulent resumption of contaminations (and social protests). We have experienced a similar sanitary cycle in France. So much for China's capitalist normality.

The specificity of China is that its health policies have taken extreme forms, to the point of the worst "excesses" (whistleblowers dying in detention, families locked in their apartments without receiving food and water...). This institutionalized madness reflects the top-down bureaucratic order of Chinese governance, which Xi Jinping's undivided personal power has reinforced. If we take up the comparison with France, it is difficult not to evoke an analogy (the personal power of Emmanuel Macron, which has played a major role), but also the particularity of a super-dependent French imperialism (incapable of producing masks!) and political authorities blinded by a crass eurocentrism tinged with racism: we had the advantage of being warned of the arrival of the pandemic and we could have learned from Taiwan, South Korea...

The coming crisis

China's growth is at half-mast, with GDP growing by 3% in 2022 according to official figures (less according to many observers) and by 5% this year. This means that the social crisis will worsen. The social pact has been eroded: parents accepted an authoritarian regime if they thought their children would live better, but this is no longer the case. Public and private debts are accumulating. Structural unemployment is on the rise, especially among young adults (it has reached 20%).

The demographic transition is faster than expected: the population is starting to decline. The CCP's incentives to work more, to marry young and to have children early are not moving young people who tend to work less (at least those from the middle classes who can afford it). The number of women who choose not to have children is increasing both for economic reasons (raising a child is expensive) and because of generational changes. The working class has not forgotten how their health was sacrificed in an attempt to maintain production during the Covid-19 epidemic. The elderly are protesting against the announced cuts in pensions. The populations of the "periphery" (Uyghurs, Tibetans...) are subjected to ever more aggressive forms of colonization.

In all its regional, urban and rural diversity, Chinese society is changing. Can the regime adapt its mode of governance accordingly? Nothing is less certain, given that it has folded around the Xi Jinping clique, which at the 20th CCP Congress ensured its exclusive control over the central governing bodies. It could turn out to be one of the main factors in the emerging crisis.

Blowing on the embers of great-power nationalism creates a link between the desire to regain control internally (the troublemakers being denounced in the name of the indispensable national unity) and the announced hardening of foreign policy.

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- Traduction DeepL and Pierre Rousset.