Xi Is Preparing China for a Harder Era

by Victoria Herczegh - October 30, 2026

The Fifth Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, held in Beijing from Oct. 26 to 29, represents a significant moment in China's domestic politics and its broader geopolitical trajectory. Taking place as the country enters the initial phase of its 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30), the plenum has focused primarily on strengthening party governance, internal discipline and anti-corruption. Its significance, however, extends beyond these formal objectives. With the next Party Congress scheduled for 2027, President Xi Jinping is approaching a decisive year in his effort to secure an unprecedented fourth five-year term. In contrast with his usual rhetoric about national strength and progress, his recent speeches, increasingly prominent references to Mao Zedong and continued purges of senior civilian and military officials suggest he is preparing the political system for another term while confronting a less stable domestic environment.

The outcome of the plenum reinforces this assessment. A record 33 Central Committee members were expelled from the party as the event concluded, including 16 military members. Attendance fell to just 279 members, compared with 315 at the Fourth Plenum in October 2025 and 364 at the Third Plenum in July 2024. The scale of these removals is striking because it reveals the extent to which disciplinary enforcement has become a defining feature of Xi's governing model. The key question is no longer simply how Xi intends to consolidate his authority but what the continuing need for such extensive intervention reveals about the institutions through which he exercises it.

Xi's speech marking the 90th anniversary of the Long March, delivered shortly before the plenum, offers revealing insight into his political priorities. By describing China's contemporary pursuit of national rejuvenation and socialist modernization as a "new Long March," Xi connected the challenges facing his government with one of the most significant episodes in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. Between 1934 and 1936, the Red Army undertook a strategic retreat to escape encirclement by Nationalist forces, traveling across vast areas of China. The Long March helped transform the CCP into a revolutionary movement rooted in rural society and strengthened Mao's position within the party, ultimately contributing to his rise as its dominant leader. Thus, Xi's invocation of this history was more than a commemoration. By emphasizing the importance of firm leadership, ideological conviction, unity and loyalty during periods of crisis, he presented centralized authority as a necessary condition to overcome contemporary challenges. Although Xi has frequently invoked Mao as a source of revolutionary legitimacy, historical continuity and political symbolism, this

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does not necessarily mean that he seeks to recreate Mao's rule in its entirety. China is now deeply integrated into the global economy, and Xi's approach relies heavily on institutional control, bureaucratic discipline and centralized governance rather than the mass political upheavals associated with Mao's later years. Even so, the parallels are politically significant because they legitimize the concentration of authority in one leader at a time when Xi is preparing to extend his tenure.

The Long March analogy also has implications for China's domestic economic priorities. Xi stressed that development must deliver high-quality growth, quantitative expansion, common prosperity and tangible improvements in people's lives. His references to the people as the party's enduring source of strength recall the rural foundations of the communist revolution and suggest that greater attention may be directed toward China's poorer inland provinces. These regions are particularly vulnerable to economic hardship, and their populations can be left behind when national priorities favor coastal trade, advanced manufacturing and already prosperous urban centers. Maintaining social stability in less developed regions is a persistent challenge for the leadership. Xi's emphasis on the Long March, combined with recent reforms aimed at boosting consumption in rural provinces, may signal a renewed effort to address regional disparities and strengthen the party's relationship with ordinary citizens. However, the extent to which this rhetoric will translate into meaningful improvements remains uncertain.

More broadly, Xi's speeches have departed from his usual emphasis on China's achievements and its seemingly unstoppable rise. Warning that the country must prepare for "high winds, raging waves and even dangerous storms," he acknowledged that China faces serious domestic and international challenges. He also described development as a "struggle," presenting modernization as a prolonged test of national resolve. This language is notable because it prepares both the public and party officials for a potentially difficult period. Internationally, China faces intensifying geopolitical competition and uncertainty surrounding its position in the global order. Domestically, persistent structural economic problems threaten to complicate its development objectives. By framing these pressures as part of a long-term struggle, Xi can reinforce the perceived necessity of national unity, political discipline, security and self-reliance. The same narrative may also help justify the costs associated with these priorities, even when they constrain economic openness or individual autonomy.

The economic challenges China faces provide an important context for this shift in rhetoric. Advanced manufacturing and strong exports continue to support growth, placing third-quarter gross domestic product growth at 4.5 percent and growth during the first three quarters at 4.6 percent year

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on year. Nevertheless, these figures obscure persistent weaknesses, including the continuing contraction of the real estate sector, industrial overcapacity and fragility in the labor market. The **growth of the gig economy**, in particular, reflects a labor market in which flexible and precarious employment can offer income opportunities without necessarily providing long-term security. These pressures affect ordinary citizens in ways that official measures of economic performance may not fully capture. Xi's willingness to acknowledge headwinds and future hardship thus represents a potentially important change in tone. Recognizing difficulties already experienced by the population could make the leadership appear more credible than one that insists on uninterrupted progress. Yet acknowledging problems is not equivalent to resolving them. Without concrete measures to support consumption, improve employment security, address structural imbalances and restore confidence, the language of struggle risks becoming a justification for enduring hardship instead of a prelude to effective reform.

The plenum's main focus on rigorous party self-governance shows Xi's conviction that a disciplined political apparatus is necessary to implement China's long-term strategic objectives. The work report delivered on behalf of the Politburo acknowledged that profound changes in the international environment, Chinese society and the party itself have created new circumstances and challenges. It called for higher standards, more concrete measures and efforts to address problems within the CCP. The distinction between the Fourth Plenum in 2025 and the Fifth Plenum in 2026 is significant: While the former established the broad direction of the 15th Five-Year Plan, the latter has focused on organizing and disciplining the party apparatus responsible for delivering it. Political control is thus closely connected to economic and strategic ambitions, including technological innovation, industrial modernization, domestic consumption and resilience to external shocks.

The scale of the anti-corruption campaign demonstrates the intensity of this approach. According to Chinese official sources, 181 centrally managed officials were investigated in 2025. The removal or investigation of senior figures is not new under Xi, who has pursued an extensive anti-corruption campaign since coming to power in 2012. What makes the present situation striking is the continued scale of disciplinary action after more than a decade of increasingly centralized rule. Thirty-three Central Committee members were expelled at the conclusion of the plenum, bringing the cumulative total removed during Xi's third term to 51. This compares with 34 during his first term and five during his second.

The military dimension is especially consequential. Xi has insisted on the party's absolute leadership over the armed forces, called for accelerated military modernization and urged the achievement of the military's centenary goals in 2027. Yet the continued investigation and removal of senior officers

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raise questions about the reliability of the command structure and the extent to which Xi has achieved his desired level of control over the armed forces. The latest developments sharpen these concerns. Sixteen military members were among the 33 Central Committee members expelled at the conclusion of the plenum. The consequences are potentially significant. One interpretation is that Xi has struggled to eliminate deep-rooted networks of officials whose interests or approaches differ from his own. Another is that the scale of the investigations reflects deeper concerns about corruption, loyalty and the ability of military leaders to implement central directives. What is clear is that the continued targeting of senior military personnel makes the consolidation of control over the armed forces an ongoing priority. This creates a **geopolitical paradox**: Xi seeks a more capable and modernized military, one able to meet the party's strategic objectives concerning Taiwan, while repeated leadership removals risk disrupting command continuity, undermining confidence within the institution and complicating the implementation of long-term defense plans.

Ultimately, the Fifth Plenum should be seen as part of Xi's preparations for the 2027 Party Congress. His failure to indicate a successor, his ideological emphasis on his leadership and the continued removal of officials he previously promoted support the assessment that he intends to remain China's paramount leader for another five-year term. The expulsion of dozens of Central Committee members, the reduction in attendance and the continued restructuring of the military leadership demonstrate the reach of the campaign. The party's own acknowledgement of weaknesses within its leadership further suggests that the challenge is institutional as well as political.

The coming political year will be decisive. Xi is attempting to reinforce his authority through historical symbolism, ideological unity and disciplinary enforcement while acknowledging economic difficulties that cannot be resolved through political control alone. A possible renewed focus on rural development and consumption offers one indication that the leadership recognizes the need to address the experiences of ordinary citizens, but its significance will depend on the policies that follow. The key question is whether Xi's increasingly candid language about hardship will be followed by effective economic action, or whether the emphasis on discipline and loyalty will continue to overshadow structural reform.

Between this plenum and the next Party Congress, the relationship between rhetoric and results will become clearer. If Xi successfully translates his political consolidation into improved governance, economic resilience and greater social stability, he may enter his unprecedented fourth term with his position reinforced. But if the purges continue without actual improvements in economic conditions or institutional effectiveness, they may instead expose the limitations of a system in which power is increasingly concentrated in one individual.

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