

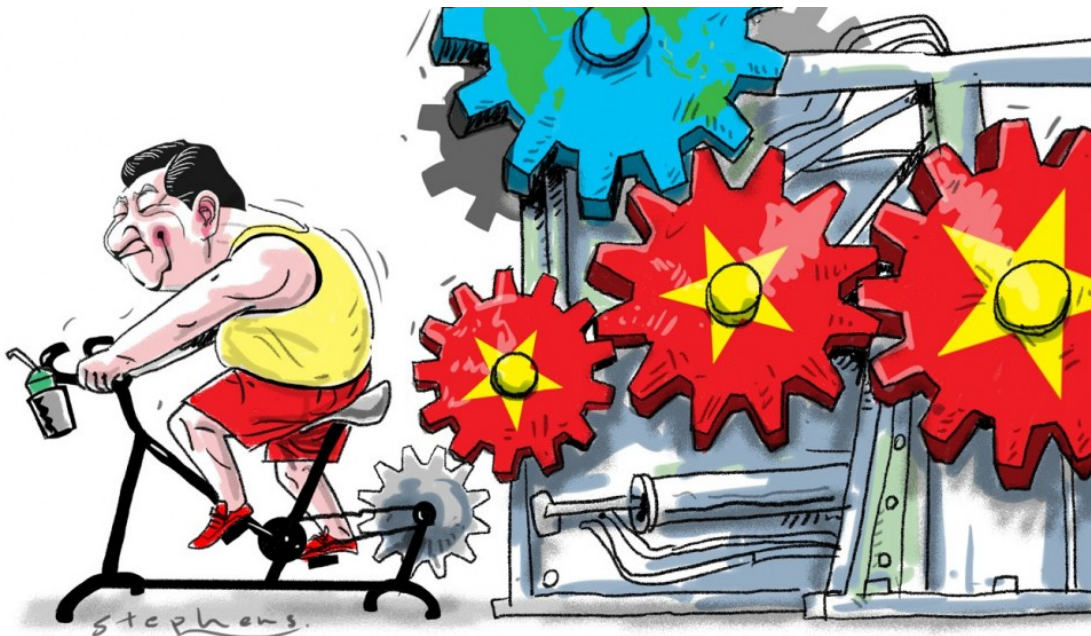
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## Xi Jinping as president beyond 2023 may be good for China – though the West won't believe it

Tom Plate says China's move to scrap the presidential term limit cannot be seen purely in black and white terms. Strongman leadership is not reviled in Asia the way it is in the West, and an argument could be made to challenge America's own belief in presidential term limits

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(If Xi does stay in power beyond two terms, he could prove the very model of an anti-Mao, and China's development could proceed apace. Illustration: Craig Stephens)



[Tom Plate](#)

And so the Communist Party of China recommends to the National People's Congress the removal of China's rough equivalent of America's 22nd amendment – two

terms at most for the top leader. Anyone who didn't see this "surprise" coming needs to have her or his China-watcher eyeglass prescription carefully re-examined. Now the way is paved for a long march by incumbent President Xi Jinping, conceivably for as long as he can stand the difficult job of being No 1 for 1.4 billion people, and for as long as – in some sense – the Chinese people can be happy with the notion of him continuing to do it.

Naturally, the reaction in America is already climbing towards the semi-hysterical. A law professor at the respected Fordham University in New York termed the move nothing less than a new step "in the continuing breakdown of political norms that had sway in China's reform era".

The widely admired Susan Shirk, at the University of California, San Diego, takes the dim view that "the risk of policy misjudgments is greater than it has been under any other leader since Mao died". Concludes Professor Shirk, who in the late 1990s served honourably and well as the deputy assistant secretary of state in charge of worrying about China, Hong Kong and Taiwan: "Xi is now unfettered. He owns the entire policy process."

Maybe. What we know for sure about this move is that, one, Xi wanted the term limits axed and, two, no one who might not have wanted it was strong enough to stand up against him.

What we don't know, though, is a much longer list, and this includes whether in fact this will prove such a terrible idea, or even whether by 2023, when the end of his second term would have ticked to an end, Xi will still have enough steel in his stomach to soldier on, not to mention the Olympian will deemed to keep enemies at bay, his age notwithstanding.

So the more positive question that might be asked in the West is whether continuity of leadership by personality will hold China back, as Mao Zedong's long run did, and at the same time threaten the West and its friends in Asia? Or will there be value for China and the world to keeping one man at the top?



(Pictures of President Xi Jinping and the late Mao Zedong overlook a street in Shanghai. Will continuity of leadership hold China back, as Mao's long run did, or will there be value for China and the world to keeping one map at the top? Photo: Reuters)

In Asia, to generalise, the ideological evil of authoritarianism is not universally accepted. Consider: without the late General Suharto, with all his many faults, a nation left behind as recklessly as Indonesia was by the Dutch when they scampered back to their dykes could not possibly have been held together except by authoritarian will – whether of the left or the right.

And, over the decades, neither Singapore nor even Malaysia seemed to have been crippled by strong-armed leaders. Indeed, Singapore's founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, left behind a country that is a contemporary gold standard for governance. And even today, some in Malaysia like the idea of strong-minded Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, now 92, returning to power.

Here in America, an axiomatic belief in the superiority of our democratic system is not at an all-time high. This is not entirely due to the burlesque of a government laid before our eyes daily by Donald Trump, who, unlike Xi, did not pay his learning dues at lower levels of government. Rather, it is also because of the growing sense that what may have worked well in the past may not work, even for America, as well in the future; and, in addition, for the foreseeable future, democracy of whatever kind might never work magically in many places elsewhere.

What's more, America's belief in the redemptive value of term limits merits further examination. In some political jurisdictions, it has helped bring in new blood; but, in others, it has replaced seasoned leaders with fresh nonsensical amateurs, to the detriment of good governance.

Indeed, in the 20th century, most assessments of presidential performance would place Franklin D. Roosevelt, our 32nd president, at the top of the list. He was elected not just to three terms but four. In 1951, the 22nd amendment to the US Constitution was ratified, which seemed like a good idea at the time; and perhaps even more so now. But there were moments in-between when America had its doubts about the constitutional dogmatism of having to force someone out of office who was doing the job well.

Xi may stay well beyond 2023 or leave exactly then. Now the choice is his to make. He will be judged not by how long he stays but by how well China does while he is at the top.

“Xi will be judged not by how long he stays but by how well China does while he is at the top”

China as a civilisation and nation has more staying power than any one man. The quality of the leader is undoubtedly one main factor – but it is only one. Former president Jiang Zemin had as his No 2 the amazingly capable Zhu Rongji: would as much have been done without him?

No-term-limits Xi is said to be bringing back as vice-president his anti-corruption tsar Wang Qishan. The former Beijing mayor has moved over to the National People's Congress and, gossip has it, is waiting for the next green light upwards. Presumably, if Xi wants him as his vice-president, then that is what he will become.

Why is it that the West will always respond to any political event in China with all the enthusiasm of a funeral director? Has China achieved nothing in past decades that merits approval?

Who really knows how this will turn out? Conceivably, Xi could prove the very model of an anti-Mao and China's development will proceed apace with improving government.

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