



## The Chinese Communist Party's Sixth Plenum

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*By Charles Parton OBE*

This Explainer looks at the importance of the Sixth Plenary Session (plenum) of the 19th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to be held between 8th and 11th November 2021. In the five year life of each Central Committee between party congresses, it is standard to hold seven plenums. With the occasional variation, the topics discussed are generally: Party and state posts (1st and 2nd); major political matters such as agriculture, reform and law (3rd and 4th); the draft of the next Five Year Plan (5th); ideology and party building (6th); and preparing for the Party Congress, which follows a few days later (7th).

This Sixth Plenum will pass a 'Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party's Centuries of Struggle'.<sup>1</sup> A 'resolution on history' has only been passed on two previous occasions, in 1945 under Mao Zedong and in 1981 under Deng Xiaoping.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Politburo of the CPC Central Committee held a meeting to discuss the documents to be submitted to the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee for deliberation. Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, presided over the meeting' ['中共中央政治局召开会议 讨论拟提请十九届六中全会审议的文件 中共中央总书记习近平主持会议'], Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China [中华人民共和国中央人民政府], 18/10/2021, <https://bit.ly/3w7hCif> (found: 01/11/2021).

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For the CCP ‘it is necessary.... to make the past serve the present’.<sup>2</sup> Consideration of two earlier sixth plenums, in 2011 and 2016, as well as of the Central Committee meetings in 1945 and 1981, is important for understanding the significance of the intentions of Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP, for this plenum.

In reviewing the role of a plenum, this Explainer puts this year’s plenum in the context of the two previous sixth plenums in 2011 and 2016. It then considers the significance of parallels and differences between the other two previous occasions when resolutions about the party’s past have been put forward. Finally, it sets out what the CCP has said about the aims of this Sixth Plenum and what it says about Xi Jinping’s political and personal agendas.

## A Central Committee Plenary session in a nutshell

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In theory, the Central Committee is the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) most important centre of power. In practice, *as an organisation*, it is less important to Xi’s hold on power than five other bodies: the Central Committee’s 25-member Politburo, the seven person Politburo Standing Committee, the Standing Committees of the Central Military Commission and of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, and the Secretariat, which controls Central Committee business. The Central Committee meets only seven times during its five-year life, holding three plenums around a Party Congress and then annually between congresses. But the Central Committee *members* are important: they are provincial CCP secretaries and governors, heads of CCP departments and organisations and senior generals in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

The role of a plenum is not to decide policy. That is done in advance by the top leadership. For this November’s plenum extensive consultation began at the start of 2021,<sup>3</sup> and a draft of the resolution to be passed was approved by the Politburo on 18th October 2021.<sup>4</sup> Whatever disagreements and power struggles have taken place in the run-up, by the time of the plenum the dictates of democratic centralism demand adherence to the leadership’s decisions. The plenum formally agrees and lays down policy (there may be a few small changes to the text). After discussion of its meaning, intent and significance, it is for

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Decision Concerning Deepening Cultural Structural Reform’, Wayback Machine, 18/11/2011, <https://bit.ly/3BCMj6n> (found: 01/11/2021).

<sup>3</sup> William Zheng, ‘Communist Party mouthpiece touts “influence” of China’s governance model’, *South China Morning Post*, 27/09/2021, <https://bit.ly/3GCabnU> (found: 01/11/2021).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Party plenary session eyes key resolution on historical experience; to look to future with “bigger vision, greater unison”’, *Global Times*, 18/10/2021, <https://bit.ly/3Bxl8U8> (found: 01/11/2021).



Central Committee members to transmit the ‘line’ to CCP organisations and members, and to ensure implementation. A plenum also confirms certain personnel moves and expulsions from the CCP.

To the extent that there is a norm, a Sixth Plenum centres on ideology and party building. Ideology has always been important, but Xi has tried to put ideology, Marxist-Leninism and party discipline at the centre of CCP members’ lives.

A Sixth Plenum is also important because it comes one year before a CCP Congress, the five yearly renewal of the Central Committee’s membership and assertion of its direction of future travel. For Xi, this year’s plenum has especial significance as he sets the stage for a presumed third term as head of the CCP, military and state, to be ratified at the Party Congress in 2022.

## The importance of the sixth plenums of 2011 and 2016

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The significance of the 2011 Sixth Plenum has not been sufficiently appreciated in its role of setting the agenda for Xi’s rule. Even though he was not made General Secretary of the CCP until 2012, he was heir apparent and in charge of the drafting committee.

The subject of the plenum was deepening cultural reform. For the CCP, culture is primarily a question of ideology, not personal development. Hu Jintao’s Fourth Plenum in 2009 centred on party building, but it was more concerned with continuing reform/opening up, scientific development and social harmony. The Sixth Plenum of 2011 set the ideological agenda and its manifestations for the Xi era. What followed when Xi came to power should not have been a surprise: the Sixth Plenum telegraphed the CCP’s intention to tighten up on ideology, and to impose strict controls on education, culture, the internet, literature, religion and society via such mechanisms as the social credit system.<sup>5</sup> Those who, in Xi’s early years, had hoped that he might bring in a more liberal rule, had not read the manifesto of the 2011 Sixth Plenum.

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<sup>5</sup> The social credit system is an attempt to set up systems aimed at shoring up trust, particularly in financial and legal transactions, by using lists of those not paying mortgages, honouring contracts, obeying court orders, etc. It is often confused with the Golden Shield and Police Cloud, which make up the system of technology based surveillance and repression. Various versions of the social credit system set up in different cities have included the awarding of points either to reward or sanction citizens’ behaviour.



The Sixth Plenum in 2016 centred on ‘Guidelines on intra-Party Political Life’ and ‘Rules of intra-Party Supervision’.<sup>6</sup> Both before and since then, an unprecedented number of CCP regulations have been revised and a series of political and rectification campaigns unleashed.<sup>7</sup> The plenum named Xi as the ‘leadership core’ of the party. Elements of the now ubiquitous and central ‘442’ doctrine (‘four consciousnesses, four confidences, two safeguards’), began to be emphasised before and after the plenum, before emerging as an integral part of ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ in September 2018.<sup>8</sup>

These elements and their extensions are likely to appear in the Sixth Plenum of November 2021.

## Significance of a third resolution on history

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The 1945 and 1981 resolutions share the same title: ‘Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party’, with the latter adding ‘Since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China’. ‘Certain questions’ is a euphemism: it covers bitter struggles between leaders about CCP policy and line, as well as mistakes which inflicted great damage on the CCP or the PRC. In 1945, the losers in past battles over the four areas of politics, the nature of the PLA, organisation (relations with the masses, democratic centralism), and ideology, were excoriated and blamed; others, who were their victims, were rehabilitated. In 1981, Mao’s excesses – the ‘Great Leap Forward’ and aftermath, and the Cultural Revolution – were admitted as errors, while his achievements in bringing the CCP to power were lauded.

In both cases, the winners, Mao and Deng Xiaoping, used the Central Committee meetings and resolutions to underline the defeat of political opponents and their own pre-eminent power.

**There are differences between the earlier resolutions and the 2021 intention.** The title of the resolution announced for this year’s plenum is: ‘Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on the Major Achievements and

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<sup>6</sup> See: ‘An Edited Excerpt of the Communiqué of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China’, *Beijing Review*, 03/07/2017, <https://bit.ly/3w9a0M6> (found: 01/11/2021).

<sup>7</sup> For a useful discussion of the CCP’s adaptations affecting itself and wider governance, see: Holly Snape, ‘The Chinese Communist Party at 100: Adaptable and abiding’, Council on Geostrategy, 01/07/2021, <https://bit.ly/3w8jWFC> (found: 01/11/2021).

<sup>8</sup> CCP members should: 1. Be conscious of political integrity, thinking in big-picture terms, upholding the core leadership, aligning with the CCP; 2. Be confident in the path, party theories, the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, Chinese culture; 3. Safeguard the Central Committee’s unified leadership and Xi as its core.



Historical Experience of the Party's Centuries of Struggle'.<sup>9</sup> This underlines a major difference: the tone of Xi's plenum will be more positive and forward looking. Under Xi 'historical nihilism' – the criticism of the CCP's past, or denial of it, as an essential foundation for today's success – has become a serious crime. Xi will not emphasise Mao's justification in the 1945 resolution, namely to 'learn from past mistakes to avoid future ones and cure the sickness to save the patient', and he will not be keen to draw attention to disunity. For that reason, a reassessment of the 1989 nationwide protests and the roles of past general secretaries – namely Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang – who were removed from their posts, will not feature.

Another difference is that Xi does not have recently vanquished political rivals. Unlike Mao in 1945 and Deng in 1981, his power is unchallenged; nor is there evidence of a struggle over the political 'line'. There may be opposition in the CCP and many who dislike his policies, but there is no evidence of either serious opposition or a serious contender. While there has been talk of 'factionalism' in CCP documents, the last eight years have seen important posts go to those considered to be in Xi's camp. Of those who might have been considered political opponents, many have fallen foul of charges of corruption.

**That said, there are also similarities between 2021 and the earlier resolutions.** Moreover, Xi is deliberately playing on them. As the announcement of the Sixth Plenum said, the CCP and people

solemnly declare to the world with a brave and tenacious struggle that the Chinese nation has ushered in a great leap from standing up, getting rich to becoming strong, and realising the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and has entered an irreversible historical process.<sup>10</sup>

Just as Mao in 1945 stood at the dawn of a new era, and Deng in 1981 had embarked on the reform era, so Xi has declared a new era, the third age of 'Chinese Marxism'.

Just as the 1945 and 1981 resolutions underlined the pre-eminent power of Mao and Deng, so the 2021 plenum is intended to underline Xi's undisputed position. The continuum of the CCP's glorious history has been emphasised in this year's political campaign to study history. The necessary pre-eminence of one strong leader is a theme of a commentary in the *People's Daily* from 19th

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<sup>9</sup> 'The Politburo of the CPC Central Committee held a meeting to discuss the documents to be submitted to the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee for deliberation. Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, presided over the meeting' ['中共中央政治局召开会议 讨论拟提请十九届六中全会审议的文件 中共中央总书记习近平主持会议'], Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China [中华人民共和国中央人民政府], 18/10/2021, <https://bit.ly/3w7hCif> (found: 01/11/2021).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



October 2021. It quotes Xi: ‘Make good use of the historical experience of the Zunyi Conference, and let the spirit of the Zunyi Conference shine forever’.<sup>11</sup> The Zunyi Conference, where Mao ‘saved the Party, the Red Army, and the Chinese revolution at the most critical moment’, is a major feature of the 1945 resolution. This is pointedly juxtaposed with paragraphs explaining that the fundamental reason for the CCP’s and the PRC’s historic achievements and historic changes has been the establishment of Xi’s core position in the party.<sup>12</sup>

And just as the 1945 resolution talked of rectification, studying CCP history and achieving ‘clarity in ideology and unity among comrades’, so that will also be the aim this year. In 1945 it was Mao’s ideology and unity; in 2021, it will be Xi’s.

## The CCP on the Sixth Plenum of 2021

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The August Politburo meeting which announced the plenum gave three reasons for the resolution on history:

A review of the major achievements made and the historical experience accumulated during the party’s 100 years of endeavour is needed for the new course of fully building a modern socialist country and for upholding and promoting socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

It is also needed for upholding General Secretary Xi Jinping’s core position at the CPC Central Committee and in the whole party, as well as the authority of the CPC Central Committee and its centralised, unified leadership.

The whole party should try to understand why the CPC succeeded in the past 100 years and know how it can sustain the success in the future, following the principle of historical materialism and through a correct perspective of the CPC’s history.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, this is Xi setting a positive tone to underpin the course aimed at attaining the 2049 second centennial goal – essentially to become a superpower – and the

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Let the spirit of the Zunyi Conference shine forever’ [‘最根本的就是形成和确立了习近平总书记党中央的核心、全党的核心地位，坚持了党中央权威和集中统一领导’], *People’s Daily*, 19/10/2021, <https://bit.ly/2YbOgmg> (found: 01/11/2021).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> ‘Xi Focus: 19th CPC Central Committee to hold sixth plenary session in November’, *Xinhua*, 31/08/2021, <https://bit.ly/3qeu1jB> (found: 01/11/2021).



2035 waypoint. The Sixth Plenum will be part celebration, part morale boosting, and part reminder of Xi's vision for the CCP and the PRC.

## The Sixth Plenum: On policy

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Any new and detailed policies should not be expected. These have already been set out in the Five Year Plan and in earlier plenums, meetings and documents. The resolution will tie together history and Xi's current thoughts on how the PRC is to thrive in the face of difficult domestic and international situations – history for the CCP is always about the future. Drawing on a (contrived, but politically necessary) continuum of history, it will expatiate on ideology and the importance of Marxism-Leninism; on the need for party discipline and rectification; on achieving common prosperity and tackling inequality; on dual circulation ('domestic where we can, foreign where we must'); on the rejuvenation (and rise) of the PRC; and on Taiwan (reunification is the prerequisite for national rejuvenation). But surprises in any of these fields are unlikely.

## Conclusion

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Plenums confirm punishments and expulsions of Central Committee members who have transgressed discipline. Those who are full members (such as Fu Zhenghua, the former Minister of Justice) will be replaced by the alternate members (i.e., non-voting) who gained the most votes in 2017 when the 19th Central Committee was constituted. Meanwhile, separate from the Sixth Plenum, a steady stream of high-level appointments is being announced, not least new provincial CCP secretaries, who will become members of the 20th Central Committee in 2022. Their appointments and their ties to Xi give a clue as to the degree of his power.

The CCP is currently carrying out a rectification campaign in its political and legal system, which controls the security, forces, police and legal organisations. This is due to end in March 2022. It is possible that an outline of likely results may be given at the plenum, in time for personnel replacements to be confirmed at the National People's Congress in March 2022.

Finally, the Sixth Plenum is part of the preparation for the Party Congress in autumn 2022. The congress will almost certainly enshrine 'Xi Jinping Thought' in a simplified title (no longer the protracted 'Xi Jinping Thought on

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Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era'), thus elevating it to the level of 'Mao Zedong Thought', as well as approve a third term in the top offices of CCP, PLA and state for Xi. The Sixth Plenum may presage those moves.



### About the author

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