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Assessment of the 6th Plenum of the 19th
Communist Party of China:
Factors of Continuity and Change

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From November 8 to 11, 2021, the 6th Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) (hereinafter referred to as the “Sixth Plenum”) was held in Beijing. The meeting included the adoption of the “Resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the past Century” and the “Resolution on the Convocation of the 20th National Congress of the CPC”. A “resolution” generally refers to a meeting set by law. It can refer to both the process and the result of collectively gathering opinions through relevant procedures. Thus, it can be defined as a type of high-level political act that exerts comprehensive binding force and influence.

The holding of the Sixth Plenum and the adoption of the “Historical Resolution” can also be understood as a predictable political element in terms of the meeting’s continuity. Moreover, the “Historical Resolution” adopted at this meeting was the third time the ruling Communist Party of China has done so in its history. This can be assessed as the formalization of the CPC’s significant achievements and historical experiences as part of official

history. On the other hand, it also reflects the aspect of change in that it emphasized new thinking on the new strategic goal of building a powerful modernized socialist country.

First, when viewed as a continuation of history, this meeting confirmed that China and the Communist Party of China are in the process of establishing a new era of socialism with Chinese, based on existing achievements. And under the name of “Historical Resolution,” they showed that most of the outcomes of political perceptions and judgments about past experiences are accepted as they are. For example, the previously released evaluation of 40 years of reform and opening-up, evaluation of 70 years of People’s Republic of China, and the evaluation of the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party are comprehensively included inside the “Historical Resolution”. This syntactic approach, shown through the Chinese political process of consensus building regarding the party’s major decisions and positions, can be understood as a pattern of consolidating meetings and thus, a continuation of their political practice.

Second, when observing what was emphasized in this meeting, there is a noticeable aspect of change in the way the party is trying to design and implement a new future, different from existing practices. At the center of this change is an “overly dogmatic” idolization approach to President Xi Jinping. In spite of the possible need and

justification for the ‘leadership core’, this approach raises doubts as to whether it may be a path towards further ‘self-idolization’. This perception is due to a slightly different nuance of the keynotes compared to the second “Historical Resolution” released in 1981. The second “Historical Resolution” criticized the harm caused by excessive concentration of power, and even clearly evaluated Mao Zedong's achievements as having been 70 percent right and 30 percent wrong.

However, following the Sixth Plenum, the atmosphere of praise for President Xi Jinping is only rising. The atmosphere being created is starkly different from keynotes of the second “Historical Resolution”. The concern for power becoming too concentrated on a single individual contained in the second “Historical Resolution” is non-existent. Rather, the movement to idolize President Xi Jinping is accelerating. This provides a different aspect from the existing practice of restricting individual power. This move further deepens the debate over the extension of President Xi Jinping's power. The question of whether President Xi Jinping will retire following next year's 20th Party Congress or extend his reign continues to grow.

The 10-year rotation of China's supreme leader is a kind of political norm, not an official law. This practice has since been universally accepted in Chinese political society. However, when analyzing the contents of the ‘leadership core’ discussed in this meeting, the prospects

for replacement of power are getting more and more vague. With no clear signaling, it remains hazy whether President Xi Jinping is seeking to extend his presidency. This type of “ambiguity politics” remains in place. However, the expressions “core,” “spirit,” and “founder” of ideology, used to describe President Xi Jinping, enhance the legitimacy of his continuation of power as the embodiment of the guiding ideology. Yet, the prospect of Xi pursuing his retirement cannot also be completely denied, as he has cemented his own thought to a guiding ideology status.

China is one of the countries that lack elections in which all citizens participate, thus providing a procedural justification, in instating a supreme power. In order to overcome this restrictive selection procedure and secure the legitimacy of government, it is necessary to obtain the ‘emotional’ consent of the people. This means that acquiring a ‘social cause’ is very important to the political process. The continuation or change of existing practices must be supported by the procurement of a social cause, in the form of the support from Party members and the general public. This is crucial, since social causes can be accumulated, and this trust forms the basis for the legitimacy and justification of governance.

However, the signs of excessive personal idolization, evidenced in this meeting, can be assessed as a worrisome development. Critics say that China is lowering the

predictability of its direction in the so-called Chinese-style institutionalization, which it has maintained during its period of reform and opening-up. After the Sixth Plenum, strong interest for party-led learning has sustained. This can be understood as the propagation of the logic that President Xi Jinping should continue to be the supreme leader because he is the “core” of the party, the “spirit” of the people, and the leader who embodies their new ideology. However, in a situation where society is divided and pluralistic values have spread widely, it is not easy for Party members and the people to accept such teachings uncritically. It is questionable whether this situation can be overcome simply with Xi’s portrayals as the embodiment of core values.

There is less than a year left until the 20th Party Congress. In order to be freed from criticism that the Sixth Plenum was a meeting that only further amplified the ambiguity about the extension of power, the CPC should continue to make efforts to remove as much uncertainty throughout the next year or so, to increase its predictability in politics. For the remaining period, the CPC must urgently and necessarily attempt to put predictable politics on track and manage risks to eliminate uncertainty about either the extension of rule or retirement.