By Bhaskar Roy

Does the celebration of Mao Zedong’s 120th birth anniversary (Dec. 25) led by President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chief, Xi Jinping reflect a silent message from the Third plenum of the 18th Central Committee held from November 9 to 11?

Some China analysts were quick to jump to the conclusion that the Third plenum of the 11th Central Committee (1979) where Deng Xiaoping demolished personality cult, set free the forces of production under the reform and opening up policy, and restricted the retrograde leftist forces, was similar to the Third plenum of the 18th CC. Certainly, as details of the Third plenum began coming out gradually, like the 60-point agenda, it become obvious that Xi had a major vision of massive restructuring, private-public partnership, but under an even stronger party.

It was evident form the November party plenum that Xi may have elevated himself from the first among equal position to “final arbitrator” position. Yet it appears that Xi had to fight hard within the party to get most of his way around. Otherwise, it would not have taken the partysome time to release the 60- point programme and another follow up.

Addressing a symposium (Dec.26) at the Great Hall of the People, Beijing, Xi declared that the CCP will hold high the banner of Mao Zedong Thought forever in the Chinese nation’s rejuvenation. He also emphasized that Mao was the principal founder of the party, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), great proletarian revolutionary, strategist and theorist. It is not a wonder he was called the “Great Helmsman”.

Xi Jinping was also cautious, however. While praising revolutionary leaders he added that they were not gods, but human beings, who could make mistakes which would have to be corrected. This was a carefully crafted sentence to keep the 38% (CASS survey) of the leftists from
pushing their agenda.

The following observations of Xi Jinping at the December 26 symposium are significant. He reminded the people that socialism with Chinese characteristics was the correct path that decided the “nation’s destiny”, and this theoretical formulation was arrived at with much effort. Deng Xiaoping was the main architect of ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’, a theory that is elastic and can be widely interpreted to socialist market economy thriving. But it also has boundaries to prevent excessive reliance on any ideology.

The nearest that China came to real political reform was under Deng after 1979. But the students’ uprising of 1989 at Tiananmen Square, put down with a heavy hand by the authorities brought an end to such experiments. The basic aspects of democracy were just beginning to take roots, but the Americans moved in too quickly with operation “Peaceful Evolution”, as related by Deng Xiaoping to a visiting African dignitary in September, 1989. The result of the crackdown was that liberals may not make another such attempt, and the authorities have developed less bloody tactics. The net beneficiaries of the Tiananmen Square incident were party apparatchiks and vested interests in the powerful State Owned Enterprises (SOEs).

The partial economic reform under powerful state controllers saw the rise of the party-official-business triangulation and a sharp rise in corruption. Corruption has become a cancer the Xi Jinping leadership is wrestling with, but the task ahead will not be easy. Despite efforts, the SOEs retain power even after the November party conclave.

The “princelings”, or children of senior revolutionary leaders are now beginning to lead the country. Xi Jinping himself is the son of a revolutionary leader, Xi Zhongxan, who was a partner in Deng’s reform policy. They are well educated, familiar with the western world. They saw their parents persecuted by Mao and the ultra-leftists, the Red Guards, led by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and the Gang of four. Many of them were sent to work in the farms, denounce their teachers as rightists and counter-revolutionaries. Thousands, big or small, died at the hands of the Red Guards including President Liu Shaoqi.

Most of the princelings grew up with similar experiences and were friends in their high school days. Their interpretations may have different shades but they revere the core contributions of Mao Zedong, his dream of a rich and powerful China, and the return to the motherland of deemed Chinese territories from neighbours, which include parts of India.

The princelings are aware of the disastrous Great leap Forward (1958-1961), Mao’s short cut to industrialization and agricultural revolution. According to both Chinese and foreign researchers, between 35 million and 45 million people died because of starvation. This was followed by the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Mao’s political battle to defeat his enemies, which also was an unmitigated disaster. Research on both subjects are prohibited as is public discussion. The official position on Mao is that he was 70% correct and 30% wrong. This stands even today, though a recent survey by the official Global Times says more than 83% favour Mao. In the 1950s it used to be said that “Mao had walked down from heaven”. Among a majority of ordinary Chinese that image of Mao remains untarnished. Under Mao all people were
equal, many think even today. This is highly significant in China’s politics today.

Xi Jinping has warned that great leaders are not gods, they are not infallible, and their mistakes must be corrected. But the deification of Mao exists not in a small way. And this is pertinent for the leadership. The Mao worshippers have the leftists to lead them if there is a serious ideological struggle.

When Mao was cornered at the Lushan plenary session in 1961, he is reported to have threatened that if defeated he would go down to the countryside and raise another Red Army. Mao was not defeated. Marshal Peng Dehuai, an upright military leader who dared to criticize Mao, was banished, never to be heard of again.

Xi Jinping and his colleagues are in a difficult place. The have to reconcile between Mao’s 70% right and 30% wrong, and weigh on which side the scale really tilts. But it appears that some kind of decision has been arrived at already. The 30% is being taken as lessons learnt and not to be allowed.

The 70% acknowledges Mao sowed the seeds of a great and powerful modern China and was the harbinger of the “Chinese Dream”. China became a nuclear weapons power under Mao and stood up to both the west and Moscow. He dedicated China’s first atom bomb to the third world. His strategic mind recognized the importance of the United States to not only balance the Soviet Union, but more importantly to develop China’s science and technology as well as economy. Therefore, China today is able to demand a special “major power” relationship with the US.

The November plenum saw Xi Jinping emerging with unchallenged (till now) power. He heads the newly formed National Security council which almost swallows the powerful Politics and Law Commission and wrests power from the central committee on foreign, strategic and security affairs. Also set up is an economic commission which will report to Xi, suggesting all major economic matters, which have his final say.

The Party’s Secret Document No. 9 issued just before the plenum prohibited seven topics from discussion in educational institutions and media. These topics, known as the “seven nos”, include constitutionalism, civil society, nihilistic views on history, universal values and promotion of the west’s views of the media. Teachers and journalists who dared to transgress this directive have been punished.
Since then it has been decided that leaders of the party’s propaganda department will now teach in schools of journalism. Mao Zedong’s political mistakes cannot be discussed in public and is a prohibited area for historians and researchers. Western political infiltration in terms of democracy, human rights, free media are seen as a major threat to the party and the sovereignty and integrity of China. Under these circumstances implementing constitutional rights will only spell disaster. But the words “constitution” and “rule according to law” will remain in the statute book for other reasons including foreign policy.

The breakdown of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) remain a constant topic of research among experts in the Chinese communist party.

Xi Jinping has publicly referred to the demise of the Soviet Union and blamed Mikhail Gorbachev for allowing political liberalization and deemed autonomy to the states. Soviet Union disintegrated very quickly, and many of the new sovereign states formed came under the influence of the west, some joined the European Union promptly and some others are in the queue. Post Soviet Russia is surrounded by more enemies than ever before.

In China under Mao Zedong, the minority populated provinces were legally bestowed with ‘autonomy’ under the Chinese constitution, but it was only namesake autonomy. Otherwise, Tibet Autonomous Region and Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region would be the first to break away, followed by Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The Chinese may claim all these territoric historically belonged to China, but they are also aware that the original China is generally denoted by the boundary of the famous Great Wall. The rest were acquired by waging wars.

Given the above and more it is impossible for Xi Jinping to undertake risky politically liberal policies. The Tiananmen Square incident remains another topic of research. After taking over as Party General Secretary in November 2012, Xi’s first visit was to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ). It was a symbolic visit. Deng Xiaoping gave his call from Shenzen in 1991 for market mechanism when strongly resisted by conservatives in Beijing. Deng’s speech was first published in pro-China Hong Kong media before finding space in the party mouthpiece, the People’s Daily. Such was the strength of the generally invisible leftists and conservatives, and they remain quite strong today. Subsequently, Xi also visited Xibaipo in 2013, another symbolic place outside Beijing, where Mao and other leaders stopped briefly to hold a party plenum, before entering Beijing.

The two bodies formed at the Third plenum of the 18th Party Congress, the National Security Council and the Economic advisory body, were not on the agenda of the plenum to start with. Xi may have taken a position like Mao took at the 1961 Lushan plenum and won. Under him Maoist “mass line” and “self criticism” sessions have been reintroduced. Yet Xi has abolished “re-education through Labour” otherwise known as labour camps. Socialist market economy will be promoted and the private sector promised greater support. Yet, the strength of the SOEs has not been diminished. Anti-corruption drives have spared many highly placed officials. Former party Chief Jiang Zemin’s power
base was badly hit with persecution of powerful officials of the petroleum mafia.

Politburo Standing Committee member and security Czar of the 17th Central Committee, Zhou Yongkang is reported to be under house arrest.

Xi Jinping appears to have been reborn as a new Mao Zedong under the political theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Like Mao he appears to have take control of the PLA. But all gains involve some compromise. Those will be Xi's difficult internal challenges.

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