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Deng and Xi:

Two faces of Chinese authoritarianism

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Maciej Gaca, PhD

Sinologist, linguist, and diplomat. From 2015 to 2019, he served as the Director General of the Polish Office in Taipei. Lecturer at the Institute of Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

On August 22, Chinese media extensively covered Xi Jinping's speech at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, marking the 120th anniversary of Deng Xiaoping's birth. The ceremony was attended by top leaders of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and government officials, including Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang, Li Xi, and Han Zheng. This event not only sheds light on the dynamics of Chinese leadership but also carries significant implications for international relations.



Deng Xiaoping, who led China through economic reforms since the late 1970s, is credited with opening the country to the world and setting it on a path of unprecedented growth. His "reform and opening-up" strategy lifted millions out of poverty and laid the groundwork for China's current status as a global power. However, Deng's leadership was distinctly authoritarian. He concentrated power in the hands of the Communist Party, maintained tight political control, and ordered the brutal suppression of pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989—a decision that continues to cast a shadow over his legacy.

Xi Jinping's leadership mirrors several aspects of Deng's authoritarian style, yet the differences are just as discernible as the similarities. Like Deng, Xi has centralized power, but he has done so with a level of intensity that has reshaped China's political landscape. Since becoming Party Chairman in 2012, Xi has systematically dismantled the collective leadership model that Deng introduced to prevent the resurgence of the unchecked power that characterized Mao Zedong's era. Xi's removal of presidential term limits and consolidation of control over the party, military, and government have enabled him to solidify his position as a leader whose influence could last for decades.

The similarities between these two leaders are most apparent in their shared commitment to maintaining strict control over political discourse in China. Under Xi, censorship has intensified, human rights advocates have been silenced, and all forms of dissent have been increasingly suppressed, echoing the repressive tactics of Deng's era. However, while Deng's authoritarianism was primarily focused on creating conditions necessary for economic reforms, Xi's authoritarianism is driven by a broader agenda. Xi has not only sought to strengthen his own power but has also aimed to reinforce ideological orthodoxy, tighten the Party's control over all aspects of Chinese society, and project China's power more assertively on the global stage.



Critics argue that while Deng's authoritarianism was a necessary evil to guide China through a period of transition, Xi's approach risks unraveling some of the achievements of the Deng era. Xi's crackdown on private enterprises and emphasis on state control may stifle the innovation and openness that were hallmarks of Deng's reforms. Moreover, Xi's consolidation of power and departure from the collective leadership model is seen by some as a step backward, potentially paving the way for unchecked authority—the very scenario Deng sought to prevent in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution's turmoil.

Deng's vision of a modern, economically dynamic China has largely been realized, but the authoritarian methods he used to achieve this are now finding a new, more assertive expression under Xi's rule. The future will reveal whether Xi's brand of authoritarianism will elevate China to new heights or undermine the foundations that Deng meticulously established.

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