



## XI JINPING AND THE REMOVAL OF PRESIDENTIAL TERM LIMITS IN CHINA

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On March 11, 2018, China's National People's Congress passed a constitutional amendment abolishing the nation's presidential two-term limit, thereby paving the way for President Xi Jinping to seek a third term in office after the completion of his second term in 2022. The change was blasted by numerous Western political pundits and media outlets. It was criticized as "dangerous," "regressive," and "potentially disastrous." Are such criticisms warranted?

Ironically, most of these analyses have served only to bring attention to the hypocrisy and ignorance of "anti-China" elements. For starters, many democracies don't set term limits on their leaders. The list includes American allies such as the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, Italy, and Germany. In fact, the leader of Germany, Angela Merkel, became Chancellor in 2005, and was elected to a fourth term in 2017. Rather than suffer the wrath of hostile media coverage, she is often described glowingly in the Western press as "the most powerful woman in the world."

What about the US presidential system? For most of America's history, the nation had no presidential term-limits. It was only after Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Democrat, was elected four times to the presidency that a Republican-controlled Congress passed the 22nd amendment limiting a president to two terms. The amendment was ratified in 1951 and Republicans soon regretted the action as it compelled Dwight D. Eisenhower, a highly-popular

Republican president, to step down after the completion of his second term in 1961.

Since that time, US lawmakers have continued to float the idea of repealing the 22nd amendment. Some Republicans pushed for removal of term limits during President Ronald Reagan's second term. Reagan wholeheartedly supported scrapping the amendment, but declared that he had no intention of running for a third term. More recently in 2013, Representative Jose Serrano, a Democrat, introduced legislation to repeal the 22nd amendment and clear the way for President Barack Obama to run for a third term.

In short, the harsh indictment of the decision to end presidential term limits in China reflects a degree of hypocrisy on the part of many who criticize the measure. But there is more going on here. Namely, it is clear that some critics have little knowledge of China or its political system.

Almost five decades ago, Giovanni Sartori, published a groundbreaking study in the *American Political Science Review* warning scholars about the dangers of conceptual "traveling" and conceptual "stretching." In layman's terms, he was cautioning against the tendency to discuss "apples and oranges" as if they were the same thing. The recent conversation about presidential term-limits in China drives home Sartori's point.

The powers, duties and responsibilities of the Chinese president are not the same as those wielded by the US president. Chinese scholars agree that there are three top positions in China's national politics. The most significant position is that of the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). After all, the party establishes the "general

line” for the state. Another critically important post is that of the chairman of the Central Military Commission. And bringing up the rear is the office of the president of China.

Like his predecessor, Hu Jintao, who served as president from 2003 to 2013, Xi Jinping presently occupies all three positions. But it is possible to step down as president while continuing to occupy another office. Jiang Zemin served as president from 1993 to 2003, but continued to serve as chairman of the Central Military Commission for over a year after completing his two terms. He also served as general secretary of the CCP for four years before becoming president. Interestingly, Jiang reportedly continued to wield influence over policy and appointments after relinquishing all three posts.

For all practical purposes, there was no president of China during much of the Mao Zedong era, as the office was officially abolished during the Cultural Revolution. After Chairman Mao’s passing and the subsequent reform era, the office of the presidency was reestablished in 1982. For roughly a decade, however, it appeared to be a ceremonial post. And the position today remains a nominal office as it holds little formal power. To be sure, the president has the ability to appoint important state officials, although these appointments are vetted by the party. And some find it significant that the People’s Liberation Army swears allegiance to the party – not the state.

Given that the powers of the president of China are not equivalent to those of many other chief executives, what should one make of the move to scrap presidential term limits? Analysts should not jump to the lazy conclusion that scrapping term limits is a “power grab” by an incumbent determined to establish a “totalitarian regime.” Rather, those seeking to understand the move should examine President Xi’s achievements in recent years.

Even Xi’s critics concede that he has pushed the country forward toward his goal of “national rejuvenation.” After all, millions have been lifted out of poverty – a fact that receives scant attention outside the Chinese mainland. At the same time,

Xi’s highly popular anti-corruption campaign – another hallmark of his tenure as leader – has snared more than 100,000 corrupt officials. The Belt and Road Initiative, a massive project to build infrastructure across Asia and Africa, is unparalleled in world history. Xi has also pushed other bold initiatives including the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the modernization of China’s military, the end of the one-child policy, and astonishing advances in quantum science, to name just a few.

Recent studies in political science journals – including a 2011 article in the *Journal of Politics* – point to the pitfalls associated with term-limits – particularly the challenges that confront a “lame duck” chief executive. In a nutshell, the literature suggests that there appears to be little incentive for other officials to cooperate with an incumbent as the end of his or her term approaches. For the Chinese, this means that much of the progress achieved during the past several years could be undone.

For example, in China’s case, term limits may encourage corrupt party officials to shelter in place, maintain a low profile and play a “waiting game.” They might calculate that the anti-corruption campaign will end in 2022, at which time they can return to their thievery. Moreover, bureaucratic resistance to Xi’s programs to alleviate poverty could accelerate as 2022 approaches. Funds earmarked for poverty alleviation might be siphoned off into the pet projects of local officials or simply pocketed.

In short, this alternate explanation helps us understand why some Chinese political scientists argue that it is in “the national interest” for China to scrap the two-term limit on the country’s president. While certainly open to discussion and debate, Xi’s performance and successful “rejuvenation” efforts appear to hold more explanatory value than depictions of an aggressive “power grab.”

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