

Uncertainty, Rising - WIUX

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Today, we find ourselves in a globally-connected world with equally global problems. While we may not realize it, certain events affect us all –indirectly or otherwise.

Two such events have occurred in the past few weeks: a decision in China and an election in Russia.

CHINA AND TERM LIMITS

In mid-March, Chinese President Xi Jinping successfully [abolished](#) the two-term limit from the country's constitution, meaning he could theoretically rule for life.

Some worry this is a step toward autocracy, and a central concentration of power in the hands of Xi alone.

China's government is broken into [three branches](#): the Communist Party, the People's Liberation Army and the Central People's Government. It can essentially be broken into the party side and the state side. President Xi is the meeting point between the two, since he serves as the leader of the People's Government and of the Communist Party.

This abolishing of term limits goes against the common consensus held by the two branches that a leader will willingly step down after two terms.

It centralizes power under Xi, meaning he is now in pretty much complete control.

John Kojiro Yasuda, Associate Professor in East Asian languages and culture at SGIS, said he agrees with those who see this as [a big deal](#).

"We used to joke, for example, that Xi Jinping had become China's 'COE' –China's 'Chief of Everything,'" Yasuda said. "And this is even more true now."

He calls this move a fundamental shift of policy, which raises issues of divisions between factions and the problem of who would succeed Xi, especially if he does not succeed in his reform policy.

"[Xi] knows that it's a life or death struggle at this point," Yasuda said. "[It] is not that he's a power-hungry sort of megalomaniac. He does see severe crises within the Chinese body politic that he feels need to be addressed by a strongman authoritarian."

Yasuda sees it as Xi's attempt to gather enough power to face the issues looming on the horizon –the chance of economic slippage, the possibility of a trade war with the U.S., the nuclear threat posed by North Korea.

Though international threats certainly are emerging, Xi seems to be focusing on domestic issues, like unemployment, the so-called 'debt-bomb' and rising labor unrest.

One of his main focuses was a massive reform of party and state officials, in order to avoid the same internal crumbling that brought down the Soviet Union. When he first took office in 2013, President Xi made a documentary about the collapse of the USSR [required viewing](#) for officials.

He's continued this in the form of anti-corruption purges targeting "tigers and flies" in the government. In 2017, [BBC reported](#) some 1.34 million officials had been removed on charges of corruption, and it's likely that number has only grown in the months since.

"When you see it in that light, you see it not as 'corruption is endemic to the Chinese body politic, it's always been a problem, I'm going to deal with it,'" Yasuda said. "It's no, corruption is going to completely destroy the peoples' trust in the party state, it's also going to destroy the organizational capacity of the party, and we cannot have this because I will not have China going the way of the Soviet Union."

But Xi has proven he's also willing to step forward and take the place left by the U.S. to handle multilateral issues.

One of these international issues was mentioned earlier: the trade war with the U.S.

In the past few weeks, there's been a [ramping-up](#) of tariffs from both China and the U.S. It's caused severe fluctuations in the [global markets](#), which shows global fear of an international trade war.

Xi is a nationalist, suspicious of Western presence in Asia.

"One thing he has shown is that he is not going to back down from western pressure, whether that's emanating from Washington or Europe," Yasuda said. "Xi Jinping will definitely want to show he can move tariff-for-tariff, but it's a downward spiral."

One of the first targets for Chinese tariffs was the soybean industry, which Yasuda says is because Xi knows this area makes up many of Trump's voter base.

"If the U.S. backs down, China will back down," he said. "They have a huge domestic economic reform program that they have to get underway. A trade war and instability at a global scale is the last thing that the Chinese government wants."

Moving forward, it's hard to say what will happen. Yasuda says we'll probably have to wait three or four years before we can really get a sense of what's to come.

"After Mao [Zedong] died, there was this general sense among the party leadership that the party couldn't afford to have another person rise above the party in the way that Mao had," Yasuda said.

Deng Xiaoping was hailed as the man who helped oust the remnants of Mao's authoritarianism and establish Chinese party politics as we know it today. These are the norms that currently are being challenged, something Yasuda says should be concerning. It suggests Xi is willing to reform party power, which would be a major change.

"I would have to disagree with anybody who says this is an instance of Chinese politics as usual," Yasuda said. "This is not Chinese politics as usual."

This change casts the government into a search for equilibrium and, again, though Xi has proclaimed a [new sense of stability](#) in the nation, it's impossible to say exactly what will come next.

Jump north to Russia, and you'll see similarly looming shifts in government.

RUSSIA AND RE-ELECTION

On March 18, Putin [won](#) another term as Russia's president. This will be his fourth term, but this election was somewhat different.

Russians are facing a wall of uncertainty –from rising tensions on the international front, especially in Syria, to domestic concerns about the economic infrastructure, no one is sure what will come next.

On one hand, there's the simple fact of Putin's age. He's 68 years old now, and facing what some are saying will likely be his last term. When it ends, he'll be 74; not the oldest currently serving world leader, but certainly near the top of the list.

Another issue is Russia's shifting place on the global stage.

Regina Smyth, Associate Professor of Political Science, says this comes from Putin's attempts to 'make Russia great again.'

"Much of what Putin has done is smoke and mirrors," Smyth said. "He makes himself look stronger by creating discord and chaos in other countries."

A few years ago, he did it by annexing Crimea. Recently, it's taken the form of the conflict in Syria, which Smyth said Putin has used to set off a sort of domino effect.

Military action there increased the refugee crisis, which caused problems for European powers like Germany and France, which resulted in an increase in right-wing, authoritarian waves that have been sweeping the continent.

And he's not just flexing the muscle of the Russian state abroad.

"This election wasn't about politics or policy," Smyth said, of the 2018 election. "It wasn't even about Putin. It was about power."

After the last election cycle in 2011, there was [a wave of protests](#) across Russia. In response, the state cracked down.

It passed laws to control protests, restricted the voice of Putin's opponents and made examples of protestors who spoke out against the government, even [arresting social media activists](#) for retweeting something seen as 'an affront to society' or to Putin.

"They arrest one guy...and you only have to do it five, six times, even in a giant country," Smyth said. "The word gets around and people start changing their behavior."

There were Russia-wide voter mobilization efforts, from competitions and prizes awarded for showing up to vote, to encouragement from teachers and landlords and employers that, [according to some reports](#), bordered on coercion.

There were also widespread allegations of voter fraud and ballot-stuffing.

Smyth said she thinks there certainly was manipulation in this election, but that it's important to remember Putin does have support in Russia.

"There's a core of people who, if it was just a free and fair election, would show up and vote for Putin," she said. "He has core support, he's not unpopular."

They might not necessarily agree with everything he does, but there is no one else who has risen to the forefront with better answers. This is because Putin and his government have been skillful in eliminating political enemies.

"Putin has been really brilliant in getting out of tricky spots," Smyth said.

She brought up the example of the 2008 election, when Putin was bound by constitutional term limits –the President may serve only two consecutive terms. To solve this, Putin elevated his protégé to be elected as President and himself served as [Prime Minister](#); in that way, he was able to sidle around the regulations, while still keeping a grip on the power.

Now he's once again facing the problem of term limits.

"This is a critical juncture because of Putin's age, because he's not going to be there forever," Smyth said. "They don't have any mechanism to replace him as a leader."

While cracks in the Russian elite show a struggle for power, no one has managed to rise above the rest. So no one is quite sure who would be able to succeed Putin.

"It feels really uncertain," Smyth said. "Most people are arguing that it will only surely become more repressive in the short-term because Putin has to keep the elite fragmentation under control."

That uncertainty extends to the economy, easily the biggest issue facing Putin in the short-term.

Russia's economy is in desperate need of reform and modernization. The nation is still running on an oil- and gas-based economy, and is in need of Western technology and investment, Smyth said.

But Putin's wish to restore Russia's place as a global power goes against that –he has to balance the fact he needs Western help with a desire for Russian self-dependence.

"In that way, this is what's different about the Cold War and now," Smyth said. "Now domestic and foreign policy are so linked and publicly linked. So the cost of standing up to the West in Russia has been fairly high."

For the sake of wish to leave Russia better off, Putin will have to compromise at some level.

On the domestic front, he's facing some difficulty from the Russia people in the form of '[non-political protest](#)' –this is social movement not aimed at unseating the government or changing the regime, rather asking for change in policy, said Smyth.

Putin allows these protests on environmental and local issues because he doesn't see them as a threat to the state. But they are a way for demonstrators to gain skills and tactics that could be applied to a political protesters.

If this were to happen, it would be a major problem. Opponents like [Alexei Navalny](#) have managed to organize a base among the youth of Russia, which Smyth said raises an interesting point.

"We're now dealing with a generation that never knew anything but Putin," she said. "How does that change how they're going to respond if he tries to stay too long? We don't know."

As for what's to come on the global front, it's just as unknown.

"Putin went into the international arena because of domestic concerns," Smyth said. "Once you're in the international arena, it takes on an unpredictable

life of its own. And that's where he is now.”

The possibility of a drawn-out war in Syria is looming. The face-off with the West, especially Trump and the U.S., continues. Protests continue daily in cities all across the nation.

All these factors will determine how Putin will spend the rest of his term, but it's hard to say just what will happen and what will come next.

IN SUM: A BRIEF EDITORIAL

In writing this piece, I saw two clear themes emerge: uncertainty and control.

Of leaders flexing their power on both the foreign and domestic fronts, as a way to ensure their control.

This can really be broken into two fronts: on one side, U.S.-China relations and the possibility of a trade war; on the other, U.S.-Russia relations and the possibility of a conflict in/over Syria.

Since I started writing this, Trump tweeted a [warning](#) of strikes on Syria, then stepped [back](#), then [ordered](#) them (which came as somewhat of a surprise), then [declared](#) them a success.

Also backed by Britain and France, the strikes were reportedly targeting “research, storage and military targets,” according to [the New York Times](#).

Soon after, the U.S.'s Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley announced sanctions on Russia. The White House almost immediately denounced that announcement, saying sanctions weren't, in fact, coming. [Confusion](#) has followed.

So why am I writing this now?

We've always clashed with China over economic policy, and always had tense military relations with Russia. What's changed?

Importantly, Chinese President Xi Jinping is no longer bound by term limits. The leader of both the Communist Party and the People's government, he's got pretty much untethered power.

Russian President Vladimir Putin just won another re-election. There's been a crackdown on protesting and an uptick in (alleged) coercion of voters.

Two major powers, both willing and able to jockey with the West for power. Both who've made it clear they won't back down, and who plan to assert themselves on a world stage.

This is important, but the most important thing about it is uncertainty –we don't know what will happen next.

Government officials don't know. The experts I talked to don't know (and freely admitted it). I certainly don't know.

That's the point I'm trying to make, and, forgive me for editorializing, but this is important. This uncertainty should tell us a lot about the communication –or lack thereof– between not just the U.S. and other nations, but between the leadership and citizens of those very nations.

In the eyes of many scholars and analysts, democracy and free elections are being threatened on a global scale. This threat is accompanied by [a wave of nationalism](#), both domestic and abroad.

And while this may not seem like a problem on its face, remember nationalism is often accompanied by xenophobia and scapegoating of certain groups of people –something that we can already actively see happening.

So I'm cautioning you to look to the past while you look ahead. As you look to where we're going, remember where we've been.

Most of all, stay informed.

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