



Basic Analysis of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: (4) Consolidation of the Xi Jinping Administration and Potential Challenges

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Following parts one to three of basic analysis on the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (hereafter referred to as the “19th CPC National Congress”), this paper will provide analysis on leadership moves within the Communist Party of China (CPC) during the 19th CPC National Congress.

Held once every five years, the CPC National Congress is the most important political event in China. At the 19th CPC National Congress, 204 members and 172 alternate members were selected for the Central Committee. Following this, at the First Plenary Session of the 19th CPC *Central Committee*, 25 members from the Central Committee were selected for the Central Politburo, and from these 25 members, 7 were selected for the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo, ushering in a new leadership team.

Given its importance, various predictions, speculations and exclusive reports with regard to leadership moves took place before the start of the event. This time around, too, various reports were made, but there was no revival of the chairman system, no successor was determined, and the number of Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission was not increased as per reports. In fact, most of the reported institutional changes did not occur, with the exception of those on the list of the Central Politburo that was unveiled just before the meeting. In contrast, expectations that Wang Qishan, Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, would be removed from the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo due to mandatory retirement were correct.

What does all this mean? Separate from the difficulty of Chinese media reporting, one takeaway is that Xi did not shake up the backbone of the CPC’s practices and systems, including age restriction. On the other hand, at this CPC National Congress, there is little doubt that Xi further solidified his power. As part of this, several CPC practices and systems were changed. The balance between these changes and the status quo as well as the implications for the future of Chinese politics are both important.

Structure and Features of the New CPC Leadership

See Table 1: Standing Committee of the Central Politburo

See Table 2: Central Politburo

Let us take a look at the structure and features of the CPC’s new leadership. First, Xi’s successor was not identified. During the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, respectively, were elected to the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo as the next leaders of the CPC. Therefore, it was expected that a successor would be selected for the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo at this CPC National Congress. However, Chen Min'er and Hu Chunhua, who both were seen as possible successors, were only selected for the Central Politburo. The fact that the next successor has not been made clear at this stage will unmistakably heighten uncertainty surrounding Chinese politics. Due to the importance of this issue, the author will touch upon it again below.

Second, Wang Qishan, Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, did not remain at his post. Wang is a key figure who headed up the anti-corruption movement as Xi's right-hand man. Given his importance, there were rumors that Xi wanted Wang to remain in his post even though at age 69 he exceeded the age limit. In the end, however, Wang was not retained and the age limit practice was upheld. It remains unclear as to whether Wang has really retired or not, though. The November 7th edition of the People's Daily carried a paper authored by Wang. It is unprecedented for a leader that should have been retired to submit a paper. There are rumors that Wang will become Vice Chairman of the CPC.

Third, the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo has become an advisory body which serves for Xi Jinping. Li Zhanshu, former Director of the General Office of the CPC, and Zhao Leji, former head of the Organization Department of the CPC, were elected to the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo on this occasion; both are key figureheads who have assisted Xi. Wang Huning, former head of the Central Policy Research Office, is a successive generation of CPC leadership, and has also been prized by Xi. Wang has the conviction that maintaining a powerful one-party system is needed to rapidly push forward with modernization, and he is believed to be very close in thought to Xi (*New York Times*, Nov. 13, 2017). The future administration of the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo will be led by the authority of members of the Standing Committee and by the sharing of policy domains much like the Hu Jintao administration, and therefore, it is expected that Standing Committee members will play more of an assistant role to Xi as the leader.

Fourth, the Central Politburo saw senior leaders considered to be close to Xi promoted in large numbers. According to analysis of Cheng Li, a researcher with the Brookings Institute, conducted prior to the CPC National Congress, senior leaders close to Xi mainly comprise his friends from his youth as well as colleagues and subordinates from his time as a regional CPC leader (Fujian,

Zhejiang, and Shanghai). In actuality, the names cited by Cheng Li in his research became members of the Central Politburo as part of the recent leadership moves. In particular, senior leaders that Xi can trust were appointed to key positions in Party management. Ding Xuexiang (Xi's subordinate during his time in Shanghai) was appointed to Director of the General Office of the CPC, Chen Xi (Xi's classmate at Tsinghua University) was appointed to head of the Organization Department of the CPC and President of the Central Party School, and Huang Kunming (Xi's subordinate during his time in Fujian and Zhejiang) was appointed head of the Propaganda Department of the CPC. The General Office of the CPC is an administrative institution directly under the Central Committee and is also a place where information is consolidated. The Organization Department and Propaganda Department are core departments of the CPC in terms of personnel moves and ideology management.

Fifth is the retirement or demotion of Central Politburo members who have yet to reach retirement age. Li Yuanchao, a member of the Central Politburo, retired before reaching the mandatory retirement age. This is not necessarily unprecedented in Chinese politics. For example, Li Ruihuan, former member of the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo, was forced to retire at the 16th CPC National Congress in 2002, even though he was 68 and had yet to reach the retirement age of 70. Also, Liu Qibao and Zhang Chunxian, who were members of the Central Politburo, were demoted to the Central Committee. In the author's opinion, there are no such precedents for such moves in recent years.

High Percentage of Newly Elected Leadership

See Table 3: Number of Newly Elected CPC Senior Leaders

Let us view this from another angle. At the most recent CPC National Congress, 15 new members were promoted to the

Central Politburo. This in itself cannot be viewed as out of place given previous congresses. At the 16th and 18th CPC National Congresses, 15 new members were also elected. The singular oddity of the 19th CPC National Congress is the fact that there were many promotions that skipped a level for leadership at or below the level of alternate member of the Central Committee. Moreover, from the 16th to 18th CPC National Congress, promotions of leadership without experience as Central Committee members were all from alternate members of the Central Committee. On this occasion, however, other than the four people who were promoted from alternate member of the Central Committee, Cai Qi (was not elected to the Central Committee at the 18th CPC National Congress) and Yang Xiaodu (elected as member of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection but not as member or alternate member of the Central Committee at the 18th CPC National Congress) were promoted. Cai was a subordinate of Xi during his time in Fujian Province, and after joining the Central Committee as Deputy Director of the Office of the National Security Commission (administrative institution), he was selected for Mayor of Beijing in May 2015. Yang, too, was a subordinate of Xi during his time in Shanghai. Given this, it can be surmised that personal connections with Xi played an important part in the promotion process.

The changes to members and alternate members of the Central Committee were unique in that changes were much more extreme than before. From the 16th to 18th CPC National Congresses, the ratio of newly elected members to alternate members of the Central Committee was around 50%, but this time it was close to 65%.

How can this high percentage of newly elected leadership be explained? One convincing theory is that many senior leaders lost their standing during the anti-corruption movement rigorously implemented after the 18th CPC National Congress. Certainly, 35 members of the 18th Central Committee lost their standing during the corruption crack-down, including 18 members and 17 alternate members, which is much larger than the three and four

members who did so after the 16th and 17th CPC National Congresses, respectively. However, the number of newly elected leadership positions was 60 more than the previous congress, so this by itself cannot fully explain the large number of new appointments.

See Table 4: Average Age of CPC Leadership

Furthermore, the average age of members of the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo declined slightly, but the overall age of the Central Politburo and Central Committee increased. The average age of Central Committee members and alternate members is over 57, although data in the table is not complete. This fact can also be confirmed in official Chinese media reports (*People's Daily* October 25, 2017). While the number of new appointments is high, the increased average age raises suspicions about the possibility that a mechanism different from conventional promotion procedures was used.

Changes in Selection Process

How was CPC leadership selected on this occasion? It is worth focusing on the fact that the leadership selection process changed this time around. Xi successfully added people close to him to CPC leadership by changing the leadership selection process.

An article in the *People's Daily* on October 27, 2017 touched upon the leadership selection process and selection criteria used on this occasion. According to this article, the selection of Party leadership (Central Politburo, Standing Committee of the Central Politburo, and Secretariat of the CPC) as well as members of the Central Military Commission, government (certain leaders of the State Council), National People's Congress, and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference abandoned the conventional voting in favor of interviews.

At the 17th CPC National Congress (2007) and 18th CPC National Congress (2012), either the democratic recommendation or recommendation-at-meeting methods were used. These methods involved conducting a vote of recommended candidates and selecting candidates in the order of the number of votes received. When introducing this method, Hu Jintao promoted it as the leadership replacement system for Chinese politics, and praised himself for promoting democracy within the Party (*People's Daily*, October 24, 2007).

On this occasion, however, it has been pointed out that this method caused various adverse effects. According to these, voting based on connections was carried out frequently, and when the meeting recommendation was used for Zhou Yongkang, Sun Zhengcai and Ling Jihua, it is believed that vote collecting and bribery took place to aid in the vote (*People's Daily* October 27, 2017). Of course, it is not known whether this explanation is correct or not. Portraying those that lost their standing as having engaged in collusion and evil activities is a product of Chinese politics. In either case, the problem likely is the fact that when rigorously implementing the democratic recommendation method, the selection of leaders did not necessarily follow the plan of the Party's leadership.

On April 24, 2017, the Standing Committee of the Central Politburo adopted a "plan on the recommendation of candidates for the central leadership" to be used at the 19th CPC National Congress, and they began the selection process for new senior leadership. From April to June, Xi met with 57 senior leaders and retired leaders from the Party and military. At the same time, other senior leaders also did one-on-one sessions with 258 members of the 18th Central Committee along with ministerial cadres and senior military officers. Leaders responsible for the Central Military Commission met with 32 senior military officers of the Theatre Command Leader.

Next, let us take a look at the selection criteria. There are four selection criteria cited, which mainly comprise the following.

1. Marxist politicians who keep a high degree of conformity to the CPC Central Committee with Xi Jinping at the core, who follow the unique socialist thought of China during the new era of Xi Jinping, and who have firm faith and are loyal to the CPC.
2. Those who have standout performance, with a powerful revolutionary spirit, wealth of practical experience and strong leadership capabilities, with a spirit for reform, innovation, and pursuing the facts, and with the ability to accept work as a leader and have an accurate view on political performance (viewpoint concerning political performance standards).
3. Those who personally champion centralized and unified leadership of the politburo, with Comrade Xi at the core, and take the lead in executing the democratic concentration system.
4. Those who have the world view, human view and values of the Communist Party and who take the lead in firmly maintaining principles and abiding by Party rules and regulations.

It is clear that the first selection criterion was loyalty to Xi. Comparing this with the 18th CPC National Congress sheds light on the uniqueness of this criterion (*Xinhua*, November 15, 2012). The most major changes to the criteria were (1) and (3). As for (1), during the 18th CPC National Congress, the criteria included the thought of Deng Xiaoping, three representatives (by Jiang Zemin), and the Scientific Outlook on Development, but this time it only refers to Xi. As for (3), for the 18th CPC National Congress, the criteria read, "champion unity of central collective leadership." This was removed this time around and replaced with "champion centralized and unified leadership of the Politburo, with Comrade Xi at the core."

Following the 19th CPC National Congress, a meeting of the Central Politburo adopted "rules on reinforcing and championing centralized and unified leadership of the Party."

These rules stipulate that the highest principles concerning centralized and unified leadership at the Politburo level will be led by the Party (*Xinhua*, October 27, 2017). “The centralized and unified leadership at the Politburo level” means concentrating power around the Politburo and Xi. Support of this became a criterion for selecting new leadership, and considering this as the highest principle concerning party leadership likely signifies an attempt to elevate the centralized authority of Xi Jinping to a norm.

The retirement and demotion of Li Yuanchao and others before they reached retirement age, too, is believed to be an application of this criterion. According to an article in the *People’s Daily*, promotions and remaining at one’s post is determined mainly by “political attitude, integrity and demand of work, and names will not necessarily be carried over even if they meet age requirements.”

Xi’s control of the personnel process was not limited to the highest positions of leadership. The selection of members for the Central Committee and Central Commission for Discipline adopted an interview procedure in place of one that involved voting. In February 2016, Xi set up the Small Group for Selection of Leadership at the 19th CPC National Congress and was appointed as its head (*People’s Daily*, October 25, 2017). This group instructed the selection of Central Committee members for the 19th CPC National Congress, which marks a major departure from previous selection process. The group created 46 investigation teams from July 2016 to June 2017, and these teams were sent to central and regional institutions, central financial institutions, and central companies (state-owned enterprises managed at the central government level) where they conducted investigations and interviews. Using the results, a list of names was compiled in September 2017 based on which members of the Central Committee were selected.

The same process was used for military personnel moves. With regard to the military, as the author already discussed in *Basic Analysis of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (2)*, in terms of the relationship

with this personnel selection process, the previously noted article in the *People’s Daily* clarifies the criteria and process used for the selection of the Central Military Commission. This was the first time that the selection process for the Central Military Commission appeared in official media, and in this sense, it is important. According to this article, Xi adopted an interviewing procedure for the selection of the Central Military Commission. Furthermore, the selection criteria included (1) political criteria, (2) combat preparations, (3) constitution (balance of military branches, etc.), and (4) age. These political criteria are believed to indicate loyalty to Xi, which clearly shows that Xi had a hand in the selection process.

The Next Five Years will be a Period of Uncertainty

As discussed above, Xi Jinping carefully orchestrated leadership moves at the 19th CPC National Congress, and as a result he successfully placed leaders who he is close to in key positions. Important practices and systems like the age restriction were preserved, and there were no dramatic changes such as the restoration of the Party Chairman system. Overall, the trend of institutionalization of Chinese politics promoted until now has retreated, and new practices and systems are in the process of emerging.

The biggest issue is the complete uncertainty regarding 2022. Until now, the greatest issue facing Chinese politics was when the leader would step down and how the succession process and transition would unfold if the leader did step down. This issue is likely a difficult challenge for the Chinese political system to overcome.

There are possible scenarios for 2022. First, Xi has left the possibility of seeking a third term open. However, if Xi reinstates the Party Chairman system, and aims to eliminate the two-term limit, this would greatly damage the current system. If the age restriction has been one key of the current system for leadership changes, changes to it would have great significance, and at the same time such a move would likely face major resistance.

Next, if a successor is to be chosen during the next five years, this process will also face major problems. Because of the further waning influence of predecessors, this raises the possibility that Xi can determine his own successor. Even if that were the case, however, it is easy to predict that the battle for successor will be intense. Another major issue is the fact that the powerful authority consolidated around Xi cannot easily be transferred to a successor without modification.

During the last 20 years, there has never been a time with such uncertainty facing Chinese politics. This sense of uncertainty could have an adverse impact on the stability of Chinese politics. The competition for power over the next five years could be very intense.

Conclusion

Over the last four papers, the author has conducted an analysis of the 19th CPC National Congress. Xi Jinping declared the beginning of a new era and brought to light an ambitious three-stage plan for politics, economy, diplomacy and the military covering 2020, 2035 and 2050. This illustrates Xi's awareness of China as a major power and his commitment to making China a global power.

Xi is attempting to concentrate his powerful authority in order to push this agenda forward. The leadership moves of the 19th CPC National Congress can be said to demonstrate that this approach has been a success to a certain extent.

However, the problem is whether centralized authority and political stability for realizing these long-term concepts can be maintained over a prolonged period of time. Doubt remains whether the centralization of authority of Xi will contribute to political stability over the long term. In this regard, the start of the second term of Xi administration has been marked with a heightened sense of uncertainty.

References

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Cheng Li, "Xi Jinping's Inner Circle (Part3: Political Protégés from Provinces)" *China Leadership Monitor* No.45, Fall 2014.

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Accompanying Tables

Table 1: Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau

Xi Jinping (born in 1953, General Secretary of the CPC, President of the PRC, Chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission, etc.), Li Keqiang (born in 1953, Premier of the State Council of PRC), Li Zhanshu (born in 1950, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress?), Wang Yang (born in 1955, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference?), Zhao Leji (born in 1957, Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection), Wang Huning (born in 1955, top-ranked Secretary of the Central Secretariat of the CPC), Han Zheng (born in 1954, Vice Premier of the State Council of the PRC?)

Table 2: Central Political Bureau (Excluding Members of the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau)

Ding Xuexiang (born in 1962, Director of the General Office), Wang Chen (born in 1950, Vice Chairman of the National People's Congress), Liu He (born in 1952, chief of the General Office serving the Leading Group for Financial and Economic Affairs), Xu Qiliang (born in 1950, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission), Sun Chunlan (born in 1950, Head of the United Front Work Department of the CPC), Li Xi (born in 1956, Party Secretary of Guangdong), Li Qiang (born in 1959, Party Secretary of Shanghai), Li Hongzhong (born in 1956, Party Secretary of Tianjin), Yang Jiechi (born in 1950, member of the State Council of the PRC, Secretary-General of the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group), Yang Xiadu (born in 1953, Minister of Supervision), Zhang Youxia (born in 1950, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission), Chen Xi (born in 1953, Head of the Organization Department and President of the Central Party School), Chen Quanguo (born in 1955, Party Secretary of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region), Chen Min'er (born in 1960, Party Secretary of Chongqing), Hu Chunhua (born in 1963, ?), Guo Shengkun (born in 1954, Secretary of the Political and Legal Affairs Commission), Huang Kunming (born in 1956, Head of the Propaganda Department), Cai Qi (born in 1955, Party Secretary of Beijing)

Table 3: Number of Newly Elected CPC Senior Leaders

	Number of people newly elected to the Central Political Bureau (persons) / Of these, number of alternate members of the Central Committee or a lower rank who were promoted by skipping a level	Newly elected members and alternate members of the Central Committee (persons)
16th CPC National Congress (2002)	15 / 2	180 (50.6%)
17th CPC National Congress (2007)	9 / 2	183 (49.3%)
18th CPC National Congress (2012)	15 / 1	184 (48.9%)
19th CPC National Congress (2017)	15 / 6*	244 (64.9%)

Source: prepared based on Xinhua and the People's Daily

*Li Qiang was an alternate member for the Central Committee at the 18th CPC National Congress, and in October 2017 he became a member of the Central Committee. For this table, he has been included in promotions other than Central Committee members.

Table 4: Average Age of CPC Leadership

	Average age of members of the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau (years)	Average age of members of the Central Political Bureau (years)	Average age of the members and alternate members of the Central Committee (years)
16th CPC National Congress (2002)	62.1	60.7	55.4
17th CPC National Congress (2007)	62.3	61.8	56.2
18th CPC National Congress (2012)	63.4	61.3	56.4
19th CPC National Congress (2017)	62.9	62.5	57.6*

Source: prepared based on Xinhua and the People's Daily

*Figures are estimates because the age of 10 alternate members of the Central Committee for the 19th CPC National Congress is unknown.

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