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Waiting for the Fifth Generation of Chinese Leaders

On 8 November, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will hold its 18th Congress¹ to adopt a work report delivered by CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao and then elect a new Central Committee (CC). This election will start the long, multidimensional process of the once-in-a-decade power change in China. Just after the Congress concludes, the newly elected CC at its first Plenum (the 1st Plenary Session of the 18th CCP CC) will elect its Political Bureau (Politburo) and Standing Committee of the Politburo (SC)—the CCP's highest decision-making bodies.

The CCP is not a cohesive monolith and China is not ruled by one or two paramount leaders. The decision-making process is based on reaching consensus—the result of manoeuvring, personal networking and balancing influence among various party factions and interest groups. This very process, including the change of power and especially the election of the top party leaders, despite having principles and a mechanism, is highly non-transparent. These circumstances make analyses of the upcoming power change in China highly speculative. Nevertheless, it is worth looking at recent events in the CCP as proof of the scramble for power as well as at the party's internal procedures, which could become a prerequisite for the party's future transformation, or even democratisation.

Towards the Fifth Generation of Chinese Leaders

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is the most populous country in the world, the world's second biggest economy and upcoming global power and is on the eve of its largest leadership succession. Due to the general rule that the top party posts may be held for two five-year terms and

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¹ Despite unofficial information that the Congress would be held on 18 October, and speculation about postponing the Congress because of the recent internal party scramble, the date 8 November could be perceived as "normal." The last (17th) Congress took place 15–21 October, 2007, while the 16th Congress, during which the fourth generation of Chinese leaders took power, gathered on 8–14 November, 2002, and the 1st Plenum was held on 15 November. It is assumed that the decision to hold the Congress in November, instead of the middle of October, is connected with the necessity to shorten the quite long time between the change of power at the party level and the first session of the 12th China National People's Congress (Chinese parliament), during which the new PRC Chairman and Prime Minister will be elected. Because the most important positions in state institutions are in the hands of high party officials (e.g., the CCP Secretary General is also China's head of state, one member of the SC is Prime Minister, another chairman of the Chinese parliament, etc.) a rather long time between the party's Congress and the parliamentary session means a long period of "dual power."

an unwritten rule to rejuvenate the party with each change,² most of the current party leaders, the so called fourth generation, will retire after the Congress and 1st Plenum expire. Furthermore, this power change, first at the party level (at the CCP Congress in November 2012) and then at the state level (at the first session of the new parliament in March 2013), will be the second smooth transition in the PRC's history. The first smooth succession took place in 2002 during the 16th CCP Congress, when then-CCP Secretary General Jiang Zemin retired and Hu Jintao was appointed as party chief. It was an unprecedented event in the PRC's history. From 1949, when the PRC was established, until the 16th CCP Congress, China was *de facto* ruled by one paramount leader who was the final decision-maker, even if formally he did not hold the position of CCP chief or head of state. Mao Zedong and his acolytes (the "first generation" of Chinese leaders) and Deng Xiaoping (the "second generation") had been in power for life and under their rule the CCP collective bodies were strictly limited in their activities. The abolition of life-long tenure and the introduction of some democratic procedures, e.g., "intra-party democracy" and "collective leadership," were important steps towards the modification of China's one-party political system.

It seems apparent that all of the leaders who will be members of the party's highest decision-making bodies after the Congress and first Plenum share common views on the general direction of China's further modernisation and the furthering of the PRC's status as a great international power. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to predict policy under the "fifth generation" leadership. The names of the future party leaders, regardless of various speculations, officially are still unknown. The uncertainty lies also in the specificity of the Chinese leadership model, which is based on so called collective leadership, which means that decisions are made through consultation and consensus. In this process, the influence of leaders' personal experience and connections as well as their economic and political views play a decisive role. Other important factors include the balance of power inside the party and the opinions of retiring and retired leaders who are still highly influential players. It is widely acknowledged that Jiang Zemin, the retired CCP General Secretary and former head of state, is still a very formidable figure in the party. What is more, the current Chinese leader, Hu Jintao, probably will remain at his post as chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) until 2014, which will allow him leverage on the fifth generation of leaders.

How the Change of Power Occurs: An Outline of the Procedures

Although the power transition process is strongly connected with an internal tug-of-war, the influence of elder party mentors with political clout, combined with the likelihood that many party members have already made up their minds at the CCP's meeting in August in Beidaihe,³ it is worth highlighting the legal procedures and paying attention to some of its "democratic" principles.

The highest organ of the party is the National Congress, convened by the CC every five years. The delegates for the Congress are elected by lower-level party organisations. The election process is quite complicated and long because it is held on various party levels. It starts in the basic party units, such as those in residential areas, companies, institutes, universities, etc. (each

² This unwritten rule concerning the highest party posts is called in Chinese *qishang baxia* ("seven up, eight down"), which means that people who reach the age of 67 may still assume high party posts, but officials aged 68 and older should retire. According to this rule, after the Congress 14 of 25 Politburo members and 7 of 9 SC members should retire.

³ Meetings in Beidaihe (a summer resort near Beijing) are known as informal gatherings of party leaders (Politburo, SC, retired leaders and experts) where the most important party issues and state affairs are discussed. It is presumed that at the last meeting, the leaders decided the candidates for office or at least set up a blueprint of the membership of the Politburo and SC.

institution/unit has its own party cell with a collective body). The last step is the provincial level. The election is based on “intra-party democracy,” which means a multilevel election process in which there are “more candidates than seats.” In the first step, grassroots party organisations nominate candidates and then county or city party committees select them. Then the list is fixed by standing committees and verified by various other party bodies. At the next stage, committees at the provincial levels vote for candidates. After the elections, the list is submitted to the party congress at the provincial level, which votes for the delegates. For the election before the 18th Congress, the number of candidates should be at least 15% greater than the mandates available.

The delegate elections for the upcoming Congress started at the beginning of November 2011 and were completed at the end of June 2012. Chinese media announced the final list of delegates in August.⁴ According to the information about the elections for the Congress released by the CC after its 6th Plenum (15–17 October 2011), the Congress will have 2,270 delegates representing 40 units, organisations or constituencies. This includes 31 provinces and municipalities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Chongqing) under direct state control, central party organisations, People’s Liberation Army, central state owned companies, central financial institutions, representatives from Taiwan, Macao and Hong Kong, and the State Council (government).⁵

During the Congress, the delegates will elect a new CC for a five-year term (the Congress decides the number of CC members). The CC meets at plenary sessions (officially, plenums), which are convened by the Politburo at least once a year. At the 1st Plenum after the party Congress, the CC will elect from its members a Politburo, an SC and a General Secretary. According to the CCP Constitution, the General Secretary must be an SC member. The document, however, does not specify if SC leaders should be Politburo members. Meetings of the Politburo and SC are convened by the General Secretary, who presides over them. Both institutions have decision-making powers equal to the CC when it is not in session.⁶ Nevertheless, the highest, most powerful and crucial decisive CCP body is certainly the SC. Its members are often called “immortals.”⁷

Jockeying for Power? Recent Factional Struggles in the CCP

The leadership succession process is strongly connected with an internal party struggle that intensifies just before the Congress. The recent scramble for power has revealed more clearly the existence of the presumed party factions. Generally, it is noted that there are at least two or three influential party groups inside the CCP—the China Youth League (CYL), or *tuanpai*, known as a populist and more liberal group that emphasises social issues and even political reforms; the “princelings,” or *taizidang*, a conservative party wing that includes the children of former influential Chinese party leaders of the Maoist era and close Deng Xiaoping counterparts who focus on economic growth as the main driver of China’s development, support the role of state-owned

⁴ The list of delegates to Congress is available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2012/0814/c64387-18735445.html>.

⁵ “Central Committee information about the delegates elections for the 18th CCP National Congress” (“Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu dang de shibada daibiao xuanju gongzuo de tongzhi”), Cheng Li, “Preparing for the 18th Party Congress: Procedures and Mechanism,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 36, 2012; “Member of the CCP Organization Department answers questions about the process of the election of delegates for the 18th CCP Congress” (“Zhongzubu fuzeren jiu dang de shiba daibiao xuanju gongzuo daan”), *Xinhua*, 2 November 2011.

⁶ *Constitution of the Communist Party of China. Amended and Adopted at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on 21 Oct. 2007*, Chapter 3: “Central Organisations of the Party,” www.cpc.people.com.cn.

⁷ This notion refers to the Chinese mythology of eight Taoist immortals (*xian*)—persons with outstanding and supernatural skills and abilities.

companies and, to some extent, appraise Maoist ideology; and the Shanghai group (also thought to be a caucus within the *taizidang*), which is under the strong influence of Jiang Zemin.

Although the criteria of the divisions are rather blurred, it is generally presumed that they are connected to the personal experiences of party leaders, their personal connections with formidable party patrons and the places (provinces, municipalities, counties, etc.) where they worked before being elevated to the higher party posts. It is believed that those who had worked in relatively underdeveloped provinces are members of the CYL group (espousing more egalitarian and liberal views), while those who gained experience in richer provinces and municipalities (such as Shanghai), or who have close relations with party elders, such as with Jiang Zemin or who are Deng acolytes, represent a more conservative approach and are seen as “princelings” or Shanghai group members.⁸

Some signals of this rivalry inside the party have been noticeable in the last two years. Nonetheless, the most apparent examples of the internal scramble became public at the beginning of this year and were connected with the former party head in Chongqing, Bo Xilai. Bo—a “princeling” (the son of close Deng ally, Bo Yibo), a tycoon and rising political star—was assumed to almost certainly become a member of the next SC. He became a famous party leader because of his leadership in Chongqing, where he not only introduced low-cost housing for impoverished people but also instituted a controversial, draconian anti-mafia and anti-corruption campaign while praising the revival of some Maoist-style actions similar to Cultural Revolution movements.

In February scandal hit when Wang Lijun, the Chongqing police chief nominated by Bo Xilai, sought asylum in the U.S. consulate in Chengdu (he left Consulate after staying there for one day). It is assumed Wang intended to divulge information that Bo’s wife had murdered a British businessman and that Bo had covered up the crime. During a parliamentary session in March, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao mentioned that a “lesson should be learned from Wang Lijun’s affair” and that “some mistakes from the Cultural Revolution have not been eliminated yet,”⁹ a broad hint to Bo’s policy in Chongqing. The day after the parliamentary session ended, Bo Xilai was dismissed from his post in Chongqing, and a month later he was sacked from the CC and Politburo and the CCP launched an internal investigation, accusing him of breaking party rules. Eventually, Bo was expelled from the CCP and stripped of parliamentary immunity and will be prosecuted on criminal charges. Additionally, Bo’s wife Gu Kailai (Chinese media refer to her as Bo Gu Kailai to underscore that she is Bo’s wife) was charged with murder and given a suspended death sentence, while Wang Lijun was charged with defection, abuse of power and bending the law for personal gain and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. All these decisions were announced ahead of the CCP Congress.

The Bo Xilai affair is seen as a struggle between the *taunpai* and *taizidang*, with the former, the CYL, gaining a victory. Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao are thought to be members of this liberal group. It seems plausible that for Hu and Wen, Bo Xilai and his controversial policies in Chongqing were perceived as a threat to China’s internal stability (Wen’s hint about remnants of the Cultural Revolution vindicates this premise). A strong state-control model combined with elements from the

⁸ Author’s interviews. See also: W. Lam, *Changing of the Guard: Beijing Grooms Sixth-Generation Cadres for 2020s*, The Jamestown Foundation, 1 September 2010; and various Cheng Li analyses published by the *China Leadership Monitor*, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

⁹ Press Conference with Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. Transcript (“Guowuyuan zongli Wen Jiabao da zhong wai jizhe wen. Wenzhi shilu”), 14 March 2012, www.gov.cn.

Cultural Revolution could, in *taunpai* eyes, aggravate social instability and undermine Hu-Wen's policy of a "harmonious society."

But there could be another reason for Bo Xilai's downfall. Although he became a star of the party, was a flamboyant politician and even considered a celebrity, he broke party rules about collective leadership,¹⁰ which do not allow for the rise of a new paramount and distinctive leader of China. Collective leadership under Hu Jintao has meant the promotion of an "impersonal," dispersed and silent leadership that makes decisions through consultation.¹¹

Despite signals that the *tuanpai* have become stronger after the Bo Xilai affair, recent events could be recognized as *taizidang*, acts of revenge. On 1 September, Chinese state media published a brief note that Ling Jihua, head of the CC General Office was nominated to the post of the head of the United Front Work Department. Ling is known as a very close ally of Hu Jintao and a representative of the CYL faction and was among the potential candidates for the next SC. His nomination for the post (in fact, a demotion) undermined his chances to enter the SC, which in turn also weakens Hu's other acolytes.

Seven "Immortals"? Speculation about the Next Standing Committee

Speculation arose at the beginning of September that consensus about the Politburo and SC membership was not reached at Beidaihe due to the more than two-week, unexpected "disappearance" of upcoming party leader and PRC Chairman Xi Jinping. Xi cancelled his meetings with foreign officials, including with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who visited Beijing in the midst of China-Japan tensions over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. This ominous public absence was regarded as evidence of the last stage of jockeying for power and a final reshuffling of personnel ahead of the Congress. Ten years ago, during the 16th CCP Congress and precisely after the first Plenum, the public presentation of the new SC later than planned was also regarded as proof that personnel decisions were being made until the last minute.

It is assumed that the next SC will be reduced to seven members. Among the factors that led to this change were Hu-Wen's "disperse" or "invisible" leadership, which raised concerns about whether the leaders effectively controlled the party and the state, Xi Jinping's political clout and personality as an expressive and conservative strongman¹² and also China's development challenges, which require consensus among the highest-level leaders.¹³ It is worth mentioning that the nine-member SC (before 2002, the SC was composed of only 5–7 members) was introduced at the 16th CCP Congress in 2002 as a means to increase intra-party democracy. The extension of the SC was also an attempt to weaken the Shanghai faction after Jiang Zemin's retirement, strengthen CYL and Hu Jintao's allies, and to introduce "checks-and-balances" inside the committee. Currently, the reasons for reducing the number of SC members supposedly are to avoid diffusion of the decision-making process, increase the SC's effectiveness and strengthen control over the party and the state.

¹⁰ Author's interview.

¹¹ See: K. Brown, *Hu Jintao. China's Silent Ruler*, World Scientific, London 2012; W. Wo-Lap Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Hu Jintao Era. New Leaders, New Challenges*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York–London, 2006.

¹² W. Lam, "Xi Jinping: China's Conservative Strongman-In-Waiting," *China Brief*, vol. 11, issue 16, 2 September 2011.

¹³ Author's interviews. See also: W. Lam, "Finalizing the 18th Party Congress: Setting the Stage for Reform?," *China Brief*, vol. 12, issue 18, 21 September 2012, pp. 6–8.

It is expected that propaganda issues, now under the control of SC member Li Changchun, and law enforcement and police under SC member Zhou Yongkang, could be removed from the SC portfolio. Both Li Changchun and Zhou Yongkang became unpopular in China due to rising spending for social controls (e.g., internet blocking, including social networking websites such as Facebook, which is not available in China) and a strengthening of the state coercive apparatus. This could be seen as a step towards the management of internal security issues in a more balanced way that would reduce the risk of social instability and improve China's international image.

Presumptive Politburo Standing Committee of the 18th Central Committee

| | <i>Name</i> | <i>Date of birth (age)</i> | <i>Faction</i> | <i>Current Function</i> | <i>Presumptive Future Functions/Area of Interest</i> |
|---|---------------|----------------------------|----------------|--|---|
| 1 | Xi Jinping | 1953 (59) | Princelings | PRC vice-Chairman, CMC vice-Chairman | CCP General Secretary; PRC's Chairman; CMC Vice-Chairman* |
| 2 | Yu Zhengsheng | 1945 (67) | Princelings | Party Chief in Shanghai | Chairman of the National People's Congress (parliament) |
| 3 | Li Keqiang | 1955 (57) | CYL | Vice-Premier | Prime Minister (economic issues) |
| 4 | Zhang Dejiang | 1946 (66) | Shanghai Group | Vice-Premier, Party Chief in Chongqing | Chairman of the People's Political Consultative Conference |
| 5 | Li Yuanchao | 1950 (62) | CYL | Head of the Organizational Department | PRC vice-Chairman |
| 6 | Wang Qishan | 1948 (64) | Princelings | Vice-Premier | Vice-Premier |
| 7 | Wang Yang | 1955 (57) | CYL | Party Chief in Guangdong | Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection |

*Hu Jintao probably stays on as CMC Chairman until 2014

Source: Author's interviews; W. Lam, "Finalizing the 18th Party Congress: Setting the Stage for Reform?," *China Brief*, vol. 12, issue 18, 21 September 2012, pp. 6–8.

In analysing the speculation concerning the next SC, assuming that it will consist of seven members, it is thought the committee may consist of the following leaders: Xi Jinping ("princeling"), who is due to succeed Hu Jintao as General Secretary and PRC Chairman; Li Keqiang (CYL), who is set to succeed Wen Jiabao as prime minister; Yu Zhengsheng ("princeling"), who is the current party chief in Shanghai and may assume the post of chairman of the Chinese parliament; Zhang Dejiang (Shanghai group), who was appointed the party chief in Chongqing after the downfall of Bo Xilai and

probably will take the post of chairman of the political consultative conference; Li Yuanchao (CYL), who is presumed to be the next PRC vice-chairman; Wang Qishan (“princeling”), who probably will remain at his post as vice-premier; and Wang Yang (typical *tuanpai*¹⁴), who is the current party chief in Guangdong and seen as one of the most prospective liberal and reformist leaders—as an SC member he could be responsible for party discipline and/or supervise internal security issues.

Looking at the presumptive SC, with three *tuanpai* representatives, three *taizidang* and one from the Shanghai group, it seems that the checks-and-balances notion will be preserved. Nonetheless, it is still difficult to predict the fifth generation’s mode of leadership. On the one hand, Xi Jinping’s credentials as a conservative politician, expressive person and ardent advocate of Mao’s thoughts and his close relations with the People’s Liberation Army (he served as a secretary to the minister of defence) suggest that his leadership will be harsher than Hu’s and rather similar to Jiang Zemin’s. On the other hand, the promotion of a very close Hu ally and typical *tuanpai*, Wang Yang, who, as the youngest SC member (together with Li Keqiang), will keep his post in the committee after the next (19th) Congress in 2017, and Hu Jintao’s retention of his post as CMC chairman for about two more years could be recognised as signals of the rather strong position of the CYL faction.

Nevertheless, there have been some doubts raised recently (just before the Congress) about whether Wang Yang can join the SC, as he may be too young and too liberal a leader to be accepted by the “princelings” and Jiang Zemin. Similar doubts are connected with Li Yuanchao. There is speculation that other serious candidates for the committee include Zhang Gaoli (born in 1946), who is the party chief in Tianjin and is seen as a close ally of Jiang Zemin; Liu Yunshan (born in 1947), who is head of the party propaganda department, or even Liu Yandong (born in 1945), a woman on the Politburo and perceived as a protégé of both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.¹⁵ The absence of Wang Yang and Li Yuanchao on the next SC will be a clear signal of the stronger position of the conservative faction and the influence of Jiang Zemin. In this scenario, the faction balance on the SC would be shaken.¹⁶

Conclusions

The new leaders—mainly the CCP Secretary General, who will become the next head of state, and one SC member who will become prime minister when elected at the Congress and the 1st Plenum and the parliamentary session in March 2013—will be ruling China for the next decade, until the 20th CCP Congress in 2022. It will be a crucial time for the future of China, and a time when the country could enhance its global position and have the chance to become a superpower. The new leaders could also provide an answer to the question of whether political reforms, even incremental, are possible. Although the power succession process is not thoroughly transparent, procedural modifications, including age and tenure limits and notions of “intra-party democracy” and “collective leadership,” that restrict the possibilities of rule by one person, should not be underestimated.

¹⁴ Author’s interviews.

¹⁵ See: “China’s year of political surprises not over yet,” *Reuters*, 25 October 2012; “Exclusive: China power brokers agree on preferred leadership—sources,” *Reuters*, 19 October 2012.

¹⁶ Shi Jiangtao, “Conservatives dominate latest line-up for the new Communist Party leadership,” *South China Morning Post*, 2 November 2012.

However, the CCP is still rather isolated from society. It seems apparent that to the Chinese people the criteria for appointing leaders to the highest party and state posts and their political views are vague because their proposals are unknown. One may only speculate about the way in which they might lead by analysing their biographies and the decisions they made while holding previous party or administrative posts. Paradoxically, the recent internal party scramble may have a positive impact on the CCP and the Chinese political regime. It not only clearly disclosed that the CCP is not a monolith but also revealed a process of discussion inside the party. This debate not only tackles the personnel reshuffling ahead of the Congress but also crucial issues for China's future mode of leadership. In particular, the differences and competition in terms of the leadership style and economic policies between Bo Xilai's policies in Chongqing (which favoured a strong role for the state and stated-owned companies in the economy and a resolute fight against corruption even at the cost of breaking laws) and Wang Yang's approach in Guangdong (he favours a more liberal economic policy along with democratic procedures at lower administrative levels) emphasise the line of division and indicate the direction of the discussion within the party in the near future. It appears that the CCP's openness to the public, including in this type of internal debate can be a prerequisite and first step towards "democratisation with Chinese characteristics." This notion could be perceived as a one-party system with real intra-party democracy with openly competing internal factions, transparency in the decision-making process and a dialogue with society, e.g., taking into account its suggestions or even responding to public pressure. These modifications could help the CCP preserve its leading role in the PRC and inoculate the party's position from unexpected social protest and internal party scrambles.

On the eve of the power change it seems that the most pressing problems for the fifth generation of leaders are internal. Bearing in mind the emergence of Chinese civil society and the middle class, an ageing society and the global economic crisis, the process of restructuring the economy towards more sustainable (via a more balanced distribution of economic benefits) and consumption-driven models may accelerate. Although the policy of transforming the economy and improving social well-being were announced a few years ago, the progress is still unsatisfactory. It is assumed that the Hu–Wen tandem lacked capacity to build consensus inside the party to impose deeper economic and societal reforms. The next leaders will have to face such challenge in order to work out a post-GDP model of China's modernisation and even make some political reforms and concessions to maintain stability in the PRC—a prerequisite for the CCP's further existence.

The relatively fragmented leadership from China's rulers along with problems of communication with the international community were among the factors that have increased concerns about the country's foreign policy. In fact, the focus of China's leaders in recent years has been concentrated on internal affairs, and foreign policy was not included even in the Politburo and SC portfolio. But taking into account the rise of China's international status, the U.S. "pivot" to the Asia–Pacific region and rising maritime disputes in the region, it seems that external relations should become a more important area of concern for the next leadership. These could lead to an increase in the importance of foreign policy at the party level. The speculation that Wang Huning could become a Politburo member and a vice-premier for foreign affairs¹⁷ might be a signal that foreign policy issues are being raised to a higher level and of the need to have better control over China's diplomatic activities.

¹⁷ See: T. Ng, "Vice-premier for Foreign Affairs Will Coordinate Foreign Policy," *South China Morning Post*, 14 October 2012.

Although the new Chinese leaders will have to come to grips with these challenges, it seems that the general line of its policies will not be transformed, and revolutionary changes are unlikely. However, much depends on the balance of power in the CCP bodies. Until the next parliamentary session, which will be held in March 2013 and during which new Chinese leaders will be elected at the state level, China will be in a transition period with both the fourth and fifth generations of leaders in power. Thus, the next leadership's internal and external policies are unlikely to be fleshed out sooner than the middle of 2013.