



China's 19th Party Congress

'Tis the Season for Reading the Tea Leaves

BY NADÈGE ROLLAND

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Every five years, as the date of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress approaches, the community of China watchers gets busy trying to anticipate the list of officials who will make it to the top leadership positions. The political system of the nation with the world's second-largest economy is one of the most opaque on the planet. What goes on behind the walls of the leadership compound at Zhongnanhai is known only to a handful of insiders. 'Tis the season for reading the tea leaves. The betting is open, the wheel is spinning, and until the party's ceremonial conclave is over, nobody will know for certain who will end up holding its top positions, nor what their selection will mean in terms of agenda-setting for the country.

Behind the scenes, however, the process has already been unfolding for some time and key decisions have likely already been made. Following the 6th Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in October 2016, Xi Jinping was formally named the party's "core" leader (*hexin*), a title previously given to Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin, but not to his immediate predecessor Hu Jintao. Xi has thus solidified his standing as the central force in the CCP. Work on a long political report to the 19th Congress began almost a year ago; internal jockeying within the party, and

a reshuffling of the military has been underway for at least as long.¹ The list of those happy few who will climb up to the top of the party's pyramid and assume their positions on the Politburo was probably finalized during the leadership's two week retreat at the resort town of Beidaihe last summer. Even the color of the sky over Beijing has been predetermined: the steel mills near the capital have been ordered to cut their production in advance of next week's event.

The Impact of Xi's First Term as General Secretary

The party's bureaucracy is a well-oiled machine. It has resisted many previous internal maneuvers, including the dramatic eviction of Bo Xilai in the run-up to the 18th Party Congress in 2012. At that time, Xi emerged triumphant from what looked like a struggle to the death. Despite the complete annihilation of his opponent, plain for all the world to

¹ Alice Miller, "How to Read Xi Jinping's 19th Party Congress Political Report," Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 53, Spring 2017, <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm53am.pdf>.

NADÈGE ROLLAND is a Senior Fellow for Political and Security Affairs at the National Bureau of Asian Research.

see, he was still viewed by some pundits as a reformer who would lead China down the road to greater economic liberalization, respect for international rules, and perhaps even respect for its citizens' basic rights. It took Xi just a few days after his accession to the position of general secretary to proclaim his major objective: achieving the "China dream" of the great rejuvenation of the nation. By the end of 2013, he had set the tone of his reign, fiercely pushing on all fronts: launching an anticorruption campaign that would catch both "tigers and flies," intensifying the ideological offensive against potential skeptics and dissidents,² establishing an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea, building artificial islands in the South China Sea, attempting to codify a "new type of great power relationship" with the United States, and launching the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road project. However, suggestions aired during the 3rd Plenum, held in November 2013, that market forces should be given "the decisive role" in allocating resources have not been implemented. To the contrary, in many respects the party-state has further tightened its grip over the economy under Xi.

As he focused most of his energy on strengthening the CCP's control over society and solidifying his own power, Xi also burnished his image as a man of the people, eating steamed buns in a small restaurant in western Beijing and authorizing songs and cartoons calling him "Xi Dada" and his wife Peng Liyuan "Peng Mama" (Daddy Xi and Mommy Peng). Perhaps reflecting Xi's desire to appear

strong and serious, this homey, paternalistic trend was brought to a halt in mid-2016 when the state media was ordered to refrain from using such nicknames. The most recent wave of propaganda videos lauds Xi's diplomatic record: wherever he goes, according to the party's official cheerleaders, the Chinese president "sets off a whirlwind of charisma" and is received "with the highest honor and respect."³

Questions Heading into the 19th Party Congress

There is indeed little doubt that Xi's first term has enabled him to consolidate his personal power position at the same time that he has reinforced the party's dominance over the country's destiny. Pockets of resistance may still remain, but the anticorruption campaign is a powerful tool that can be easily used to sideline and expel unwanted rising stars.⁴ Among the possible 19th Congress outcomes, only one is close to a sure thing: Xi will remain in power for the next five years. But beyond this, uncertainties abound. Will the Party Congress enshrine Xi's political contributions in the CCP constitution, raising them to the level of Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory? Does Xi wish to stay in power beyond 2022? Can he engineer such a major disruption in the quasi-institutionalized political transition process followed since Jiang Zemin?"

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² "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere," Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's General Office, trans. by ChinaFile, November 8, 2013, <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

³ Tom Phillips, "A Whirlwind of Charisma!': China Propaganda Blitz Hails Xi, the Great Statesman," *Guardian*, August 31, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/01/a-whirlwind-of-charisma-china-propaganda-blitz-hails-xi-the-great-statesman>; and "Promo: Major-Country Diplomacy Episode 1," CCTV, August 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5q14x0o51IE>.

⁴ Consider, for example, the fall of Sun Zhengcai, who had been Chongqing party chief until July. See Chris Buckley, "Former Political Star in China Is Under Party Investigation," *New York Times*, July 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/24/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-sun-zhengcai.html>.

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According to China's constitution, a president can only serve for two five-year terms, but there is no such rule for the position of secretary general of the CCP. Xi might choose to be crowned as party chairman, like Mao. But even official titles do not say much about the reality of power in China: after all, Deng remained paramount leader after his official retirement, serving as the chairman of China's Bridge Association. Of the seven current Politburo Standing Committee members, five are due to retire. Will the Standing Committee be reduced to five members, kept at seven, or disappear altogether to be replaced by a group of vice-chairmen? Will Wang Qishan, a staunch ally to Xi who has led the anticorruption effort, remain in power even though he is due to retire?⁵

Beyond questions about internal power politics, many uncertainties also remain about the course set for the country. Now that Xi is in full control, will he finally opt for deeper reforms and address the country's pressing economic challenges? We should not hold our breath in anticipation of a major shift and a sudden embrace of a fully liberalized economy and market-driven resource-allocation model. By 2021, the year he is set to preside over celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of the CCP's founding, Xi is supposed to have achieved one of the "two centenary goals" that the party has set for itself: transforming China into a "moderately prosperous society" with a GDP and per capita income doubled from the levels of 2010. While the cast of supporting characters and the broad outlines of declared policy will be clearer after next week, Xi's ability to achieve this ambitious goal will remain in doubt long after the Party Congress has concluded. ∞

⁵ The conventional age of retirement for CCP officials is 67, and Wang turned 69 in July.

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1414 NE 42ND STREET, SUITE 300
SEATTLE, WA 98105 • 206-632-7370

1819 L STREET NW, NINTH FLOOR
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