



The Chinese Communists' New Politburo Standing Committee: More Claque Than Collective Leadership

BY WILLIAM C. MCCAHERILL JR.

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Crowned for a second term as Communist Party general secretary, and with his “Thought” and signature policies enshrined in the party constitution, Xi Jinping on October 25 introduced the other six members of the Politburo Standing Committee, who, with Xi, will lead China over the next five years. The new Standing Committee looks more like Xi’s claque than a collective leadership. It includes longtime Xi loyalists, placeholders, and a mysterious guardian of party orthodoxy. Not one among the six could be seen as a rival or a potential successor, thus raising the odds that Xi plans to reign for a long time to come. Moreover, with “Xi Jinping Thought” now an article of party faith, Xi’s authority is so great that this Standing Committee has less importance than any in decades. The new party leaders will be assigned government roles at the March 2018 National People’s Congress, and numerous other senior government positions will change hands between now and then. Who the new Standing Committee members are and whether Xi’s “new era” style of one-man rule can serve China in the 21st century will be addressed in the discussion that follows.¹

Habemus Quodcumque: We Have a Standing Committee

No white smoke curled from the chimneys of Beijing’s Great Hall of the People as Xi introduced his Politburo Standing Committee members. But the setting, the hushed audience of Chinese and foreign journalists, the breathless anticipation of the Chinese media live broadcasters all conduced to create an air of suspense over the proceedings, which were labeled a “press event” in which the media would meet the Communist Party’s new Standing Committee.

Just before the clock struck noon, the seven black-suited, white-shirted sexagenarians mounted a low red-carpeted platform. Xi led his court onstage, stood in their middle for a photo-op moment, then moved to a broad podium to deliver a short speech. Xi explained that he had been named to a second term by the 19th Central Committee, which had just held its first plenary session. His reappointment represented not only “approval of my work but also encouragement”

WILLIAM C. MCCAHERILL JR. is a Senior Resident Fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research. The views expressed are those of the author.

¹ For a discussion of Xi’s work report and the meaning of Xi Jinping Thought, see my earlier essay on the 19th Party Congress: “China’s ‘New Era’ and ‘Xi Jinping Thought,’” National Bureau of Asian Research, Commentary, October 24, 2017, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=811>.

to continue in the directions mandated by the 19th Party Congress. That mandate is, of course, Xi Jinping Thought and all its works and pomps, although Xi had no need to make that explicit in his brief Wednesday remarks. He then proceeded to introduce the other six Politburo Standing Committee members in protocol order:

- Li Keqiang, number two in the previous Standing Committee and State Council premier or head of government
- Li Zhanshu, Xi's long-time confidante and right-hand man who has been the director of the party's General Office for the past five years
- Wang Yang, an affable technocrat, vice premier of the State Council, and incumbent of senior provincial posts under Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao
- Wang Huning, a mysterious theoretician who has served Xi and his two immediate predecessors as the "guardian of orthodoxy," an advocate of "neo-authoritarianism"
- Zhao Leji, another Xi intimate who has headed the party's Organization Department since 2012 and has been tipped to run the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection
- Han Zheng, a former Shanghai mayor and party secretary who may be a bridge between Xi and the remnants of Jiang Zemin's "Shanghai gang"

However these men have demonstrated their competence in disparate fields and their fealty to Xi, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the group as a whole lacks luster. As the half dozen cadres stood onstage, wearing expressions of blank solemnity and clutching their suit jacket hems, they appeared as Xi's slightly nervous supporting cast rather than politicians in their own right, let alone rivals or heirs apparent. With Xi's second term, one-man rule has returned to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Ex Cathedra

Having introduced his "leadership team," as the Chinese media labeled the Standing Committee, Xi proceeded to set out the benchmarks for his second term. But he first displayed the Chinese Communists' flair for citing statistics others would consider meaningless. The just-concluded 19th Party Congress, Xi noted proudly, had received 855 congratulatory telegrams from 162 nations and 452 political parties, of which 814 cables had come from heads of state, governments, or political parties.

That numerology done, he then observed that before the 20th Party Congress meets in 2022, China will mark several important milestones en route to "the great revival of the Chinese race." Next year is the 40th anniversary of the "reform and opening" policies launched by Deng Xiaoping and which Xi intended to "comprehensively deepen." In 2019, the People's Republic of China will celebrate its 70th anniversary, an occasion likely to warrant a grand military review on National Day on October 1. With the 14th Five-Year Plan to be formulated in 2019, China will become "richer and stronger," promised Xi. By 2020, China will have achieved its near-term economic goal of becoming a "moderately well-off society," having doubled per capita GDP from its 2010 level to hit a target around \$9,000. "No one will be left out" of this prosperity, Xi stressed.

The big year, though, will be 2021, when the CCP marks its 100th birthday. This centenary of "the world's largest Communist Party," Xi glowed, will find the CCP in the "prime of life...capable of spearheading revolution as well as reform, forever the servants of the people, never resting, always in the vanguard of the times." Xi's confident remarks on the party's achievements, strength, and prowess no doubt prefigure yet more triumphalist rhetoric that will envelop the 2021 anniversary celebrations.

Other Notables

In addition to its 7 Standing Committee members, the 25-member Politburo includes at least two other figures who will bear on China's approach to the world beyond the Great Wall. To formulate and carry out the assertive foreign policies embedded in Xi Jinping Thought, Xi has elevated veteran diplomat Yang Jiechi to the Politburo. That promotion implies that he will be made a vice premier of the State Council, the first time the Chinese "cabinet" has included a foreign affairs professional since Qian Qichen served in that role in the late 1990s. Yang has dealt with Americans since, as a young interpreter, he accompanied then head of the U.S. Liaison Office George H.W. Bush on his travels around China in the 1970s. While Yang's interactions with Americans, as with other foreigners for that matter, have not always been the most pleasant, he has cultivated strong ties to the Bush family and their Republican advisers.

Also joining the Politburo is Liu He, Xi's boyhood friend and economic guru, and he, too, will likely become a vice premier at the March 2018 National People's Congress. How Liu will guide Xi's economic policies is unclear, however. Vaunted as the lead author of both the World Bank's *China 2030* report—a clarion call for market-oriented reforms that was never published in China—and "the market should play a decisive role" passages of the 2013 Third Plenum "Decisions," Liu has been seen by foreign financiers and investors as their last best hope for market-style reforms to the Chinese economy. The anglophone, partly U.S.-educated Liu has striven to give that impression in his conversations with foreigners. But such hopes may have been misplaced. For while Liu certainly knows his market economics, he knows his Chinese politics even better. Aside from his comments to foreigners, he has shown no recent sign that he would advocate to Xi opening the economy to market forces that the party could not control.

Other Politburo members likely to keep the tea leaf readers busy include:

- Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia, senior PLA generals who are both 67 years old and vice chairmen of the party's Central Military Commission, with extensive experience in the military units on the North Korean and Russian borders
- Li Qiang, Chen Min'er, Ding Xuexiang, and Cai Qi, who are Xi protégés in their 50s and early 60s
- Hu Chunhua, the once and perhaps future rising star who was a seeming protégé of Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao and has more recently fawned in his expressions of fealty to Xi

Whether among the younger members of this cohort there one day emerges a successor to Xi, time will tell. For the nonce, that looks unlikely.

Next Steps

Scholars rightly speak of today's Chinese regime as a party-state. For all practical purposes, the ruling Communist Party is the Chinese government, even if party leaders promote the fiction that the party merely guides the work of a separate entity labeled "government" or more often and hypocritically "people's government." Nonetheless, in the coming months, the newly appointed Politburo and Central Committee will be assigned government positions and management jobs in the largest state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

At the National People's Congress in March 2018, party leaders will acquire government titles. General Secretary Xi will be "elected" to a second term as state president, while other Politburo Standing Committee members will be named premier of the State Council, chairman of the National People's Congress—the sham legislature shown on the organizational charts as China's supreme decision-making body—and

chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, an "advisory" assembly of non-Communist worthies. One Standing Committee member might even become state vice president, a title that Xi once held as understudy to his predecessor but totally voided of meaning during his term as general secretary. Politburo members like Yang Jiechi and Liu He will be named vice premiers, with each being given a functional portfolio.

For clues to how economic policies will fare in Xi's second term, observers should look to the annual Central Economic Work Conference, which typically convenes in December and brings together all major economic policymakers, provincial leaders, SOE chairmen, and the like—China's real "Fortune 500." One feature of this year's Economic Work Conference will surely be financial sector guidance and regulation, including public and private debt, shadow banking, the exchange rate, and outbound investment. There should also appear the new governor of the People's Bank of China, as the venerable Zhou Xiaochuan will finally retire.

While most Politburo members will take government titles, either in the central apparatus in Beijing or in the larger provinces, some will continue in purely party jobs. One such man will be Zhao Leji, the Xi confidante who has run the party's Organization Department since 2012. Zhao will likely take over the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the party's internal watchdog that Wang Qishan has led these past five years. This commission has been generously funded and staffed, in a sign that the "anticorruption" campaign spearheaded by Wang will continue under Zhao. Moreover, Zhao will come to the role knowing, from his Organization Department days, which skeletons lie in whose closets. With his liege in charge, Xi will continue to use the party's inspectors not only to enforce ethical standards on cadres but also to ensure alignment with the "party line" and with himself.

Can One-Man Rule Work Again in China?

There were good reasons that Deng Xiaoping and his confreres created a collective party leadership in the early 1980s. None wanted to repeat the economic folly or political turbulence wrought by Mao's one-man rule. While Deng typically gave himself the last word in important party decisions, he did have to build some consensus within the Politburo and hence consulted his colleagues, most of whom came with their own civil war credentials, patronage networks, or factional followers.

Xi will face no such constraint, at least in the early days of his second term. Moreover, he is an extraordinarily shrewd politician, whom thoughtful Chinese describe as *shigu* (世故), an adjective that connotes a command of worldly wisdom, cold-hearted cunning, and calculation in equal proportions, with a leaven of self-confidence and a pinch of cruelty thrown in for good measure. Chinese used this same adjective to describe Mao.

China now has, of course, an immeasurably more complex political economy than in Deng's 1980s. Xi himself may have been alluding to this complexity when in his work report for the Party Congress he spoke of imbalances, new contradictions, and ideological struggle. But it remains to be seen whether his style of strong-man rule will serve China in the new era whose advent he proclaimed at the 19th Party Congress. Xi will be tested if the economy veers off track, social unrest occurs, a public health or foreign policy crisis erupts, or any other of many possible black swans should fly across China's path. Although Xi seems to have no rival at the moment, his campaigns have bred resentment, and in a fraught future, there may well be those who will snipe at him and try to bring him down if he falters. So CCP history and the party's own dialectic tell us. Today's synthesis begets tomorrow's thesis, and a competing antithesis arises to contest party order until a fresh synthesis emerges.

Now mounting the throne for a second term, Xi may face trying times in 2021, the party's centennial year, and in 2022, when the 20th Party Congress should convene. Xi will be 69 years old then and perhaps, as he said of the party itself, still in the "prime of life." Should he seek a third term as general secretary, he will want to keep an eye out for sharks lurking in the dark waters of the Zhong Nan Hai. ∞

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

1819 L STREET NW, NINTH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 • 202-347-9767

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