

THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY CONGRESS: AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE

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Every five years the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) presents a new cohort of senior cadres to run the world's most populous country. The Party Congress is probably the most important date in China's political calendar, equivalent to the moment white smoke rises from the Vatican when a new pontiff has been chosen.

October 18th 2017 will see the unveiling of the latest crop of senior party members to determine China's next stage of development. But its implications will last longer than simply the five year term the new leaders will serve until the next Congress in 2022.

In the past eighteen months, Western pundits and the media in Hong Kong have played the game of endless speculation and debate of who will be 'in' and 'out' at this prestigious conclave, which will not only choose leaders for the world's second largest economy but also the world's largest political party, with over 88 million members.

Like the Vatican, the CCP has always kept its conclave selection process a top secret. The official state media Xinhua News Agency will only disclose a seemingly choreographed process several months after the Congress with leadership approval (Xinhua, 2012a).

This Strategic Update makes no attempt to predict the leadership line-up to emerge from the October 2017 Congress, or speculate about the bargaining process between elites to choose the new team. Instead, it aims to provide a concise guide to what the CCP Congress is, why it is crucial to the rest of the world to keep watch on this particular political event, and how it is likely to impact upon Chinese policy. All the information in this update is drawn from publicly available sources.

Media attention will most likely be focused on personnel changes at the very top, but there are other equally important tasks to be fulfilled during the gathering – producing a political report, and revising the Party constitution.

The main question on analyst's lips approaching the Congress is if Xi Jinping, as President and General Secretary of the CCP, is centralising power to an extent unseen since Mao (De Jonquieres, 2017; Fenby, 2017; MacFarquahr, 2017; Saich 2017). However, the 2017 Congress is likely to see more continuity than radical change, within the constraints of institutionalised collective leadership. Such continuity derives from both the official and unspoken consensus amongst generations of CCP members, all the way back to its establishment in 1921: Shakespeare's quote "What's past is prologue" could apply to the Party in 2017.

WHAT IS THE CCP CONGRESS?

Many readers will ask a fundamental question: what is a CCP Congress and how does it differ from the conventional Western political party convention or conference?

Party Congresses are the most important political event in the Chinese political calendar. They are not to be confused with the two national congresses¹ convened in early March every year as those are the congresses for the central government, not the Party.

According to the CCP Constitution, Party congresses are required to convene every five years. This convention was a key element of Deng Xiaoping's 1978 reforms. He aimed to restore an institutionalised political process after a chaotic ten years of Cultural Revolution with numerous political purges and personal attacks involved in Party Congresses under Mao.

In keeping with Deng's legacy, this Party constitutional practice has been rigorously followed since the 12th Party Congress in 1982 (Deng, 1981; Ibid, 1982). This regularity in practice and the consistency of the procedure in Party Congress preparations open a rare window of opportunity to see inside one of the world's most exclusive and influential organisations.

Party congresses have prioritised three intertwined functions.

Firstly, they establish the Party's principal agenda across all policy sectors. It is the most authoritative body in the CCP organisational hierarchy and so its policy prescriptions reflect the CCP's authoritative interpretations on all issues that the congress addresses. During the session, a Party congress offers a consensus-based evaluation of the Party's work over the past five years since the previous congress and a thorough examination of the Party's present situation, and also sets the principal guidance for the Party's priorities and tasks for the next five years until the next session.

These overall judgments about the past work and future priorities come in the form of a very long and rather seemingly tedious “political report 政治报告”, usually delivered by the Party’s top leader, the General Secretary, in the name of the outgoing cohort of the most senior members of the CCP.

The second key function for the Party Congress is to revise the Party Constitution. The current Party Constitution was adopted at the 12th Party Congress in 1982, and every party congress since has introduced some changes and adjustments to it. Examples of changes could be amending the Party’s ‘guiding ideology’ set out in the constitution, Party recruitment criteria, or stipulations on membership in top leadership bodies. Despite the dry language of those changes in the Party Constitution, all those adjustments are politically significant because they endow the measures with final authority, at least in principle.

The third and the final task for the Party congress is to change the CCP’s top leadership, a task that attracts so much limelight and speculation in the West that many erroneously believe the sole function of the congress. The Party will also elect a new Central Committee and a new Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CDIC) (see below).

These three functions are fundamentally intertwined. Assessments of the success or failures of the party’s work in the previous five years affect the reputation and prospects of party leaders in power during that period. As the ‘political report’ shapes the political context, constitutional changes either strengthen the authority of General Secretary of the party or set the institutional constraints on the new leadership.

WHAT IS A PLENUM?

The work of the Party Congress doesn’t take place purely in the days it is in session. What is known as ‘The Party Congress’ is technically the first plenum of the new Party Congress. It opens a week after the seventh and final plenum of the previous party Congress. The tradition of plenum, or assemblies, has been established since the party was founded in 1921. Each modern Party Congress has seven plenums, with the final plenum administratively and certainly politically closely linked with the first of the new Congress in setting the political agenda. So in 2017, the seventh plenum of the 18th Party Congress takes place in early October and will prepare for the new Congress, for example by approving the shortlist of new Politburo nominees (see next page).

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THE PARTY CONGRESS?

There are usually around 2,300 delegates from all levels of the CCP hierarchy across 31 provinces. You can think of them as a ‘pyramid’ with five layers.

At the bottom layer, there are around 1,800 low-middle ranking party members chosen from across the country. They are usually governors and deputy governors at township-city level. In addition many celebrities, providing they are party members, are amongst participants at this level to mark the “inclusiveness” of the Party (Xinhua 2012a). These include for example, current and former Olympic champions, astronauts, opera singers, and TV anchors, all alongside some ordinary workers such as bus drivers and steel workers.

Above these party members, on the fourth layer, is the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CDIC) with 130 members.

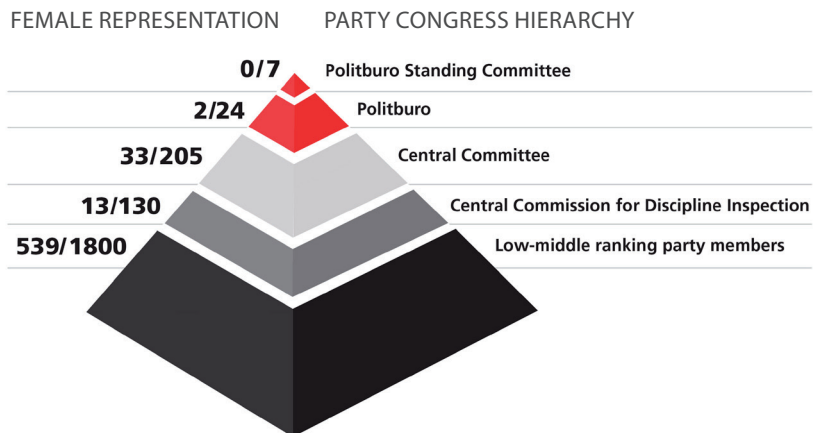
Above the CDIC on the third layer is the CCP Central Committee, currently consisting of 205 members with 171 alternate members.

Members for those two committees are drawn from various central governmental ministries and provincial governments as well as key State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), the Central Bank, and the People’s Liberation Army.

Usually, the Central Committee contains party members who rank at ministerial level and party secretaries of provinces, a very small number of key SOE chairmen, the governor of the central bank, and commanders in chief of each PLA military region.

The CDIC membership is comprised of deputy ministerial-level party members, deputy governors, deputy regional commander in chiefs, and a larger number of SOE chairmen. (Chairman of the majority of key SOEs and state owned banks are positioned at vice-ministerial level in the Party hierarchy, with

Figure 1. The Chinese Communist Party Congress



some occasional exceptions. For example, the Chairman of the Bao Steel Company, the Chairman of China Investment Corporation, and the Chairman of China Railway Company who rank at full ministerial level (People's Daily, 2012.)

Above the CDIC and Central Committee are the core of the congress: the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee.

At the second level is the Politburo, which currently has 24 members². This includes the leaders of some key municipalities and the heads of some of the most important ministries (which, unlike most Western countries, does not include the foreign minister). Currently 2 of the 24 members are female.

Finally, on the top level is the Politburo Standing Committee, currently comprised of 7 members, headed by General Secretary Xi Jinping. (The 7 Politburo Standing Committee members remain among the 24 members of the Politburo.)

We can expect the top two levels to be significantly reshuffled during the Party Congress. However even in a year of change, it is very unlikely that this will include the first ever female member of the Politburo Standing Committee.

HOW IS THE POLITBURO ELECTED DURING THE PARTY CONGRESS?

Unlike in liberal democracies with multi-party contested elections, CCP Politburo members are not nominated by political campaigns and directly voted on by constituents.

According to Xinhua official coverage of the Party congresses there is a “democratic recommendation民主推荐” procedure, essentially a straw poll, of all those who will be participating in the Party Congress. All participants in the Congress are then given a ballot listing the names of around 200 candidates in stroke order (the Chinese equivalent to Alphabetical order) (Xinhua, 2012). The “recommendation” process, or short-listing procedure, is completed in the run up to the start of the Congress.

A few senior delegates may express their preferences to their colleagues anonymously during this process. All of the shortlisted candidates must meet the criteria for membership in the Politburo: serving at either a ministerial rank or above or in the PLA at military region level or above, and be a maximum of 62 years old.

Based on the tally of this straw poll and current Politburo members’ own preferences, the current Politburo and Standing Committee will approve the proposed nominees, conclude the Seventh Plenum of the 18th Party Congress and call for the 19th Congress (Xinhua, 2017). The delegates at the Party Congress then formally, or ceremonially, cast their votes for the Politburo at the Party Congress although the result is pre-agreed, somewhat similarly to the US Electoral College.

The process of “democratic recommendation”, ironic as it may sound, is one of the institutionalised procedures advocated by Deng in 1982 (Deng, 1982). Xi Jinping’s predecessor Hu Jintao promoted this process when he succeeded

Jiang Zemin as in 2002. It was widely seen as a part of his effort to expand “intra-party 党内民主” democracy.

The leadership announces the results of the new full Central Committee and Politburo members in stroke order, and the results of alternate members of the Central Committee according to the number of votes they received in the Congress, both via official press release (Xinhua, 2012b).

The nomination process is supervised by a troika consisting of the Party General Secretary, supported by the Executive Secretary of the Party Secretariat and the Head of the Party Organisation Department. In 2017 this will be Xi Jinping, Executive Secretary Liu Yunshan, and Organisation Department Head Zhao Leji.

If the CCP continues to follow the convention practiced in the past twenty years, Politburo members over the age of 67 will retire from the Politburo and the Standing Committee. In which case, 5 of the 7 current Standing Committee members; and 6 out of 17 other Politburo members will step down. (In addition, 4 of the 11 Party Central Military Committee members would be expected to retire.)

Despite the intense speculation in the Western press, there will be no solid information on the composition of the 19th Party Congress leadership until 18th October 2017. All guesses before that are rather futile.

HOW ARE THE CCP POLITBURO STANDING COMMITTEE MEMBERS CHOSEN?

Analysis of appointments to the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) has never been a straightforward process. Some have filled the vacuum of information with stories of intra-party factional infighting and intense personal competition. However, the history of these appointments can shed some light on this very opaque area.

The PSC consists of between five and nine members depending on each Congress. It is the supreme decision-making entity of the Communist Party as well as the People’s Republic of China.

If the 19th Congress follows precedent and convention, there are three de-facto rules to be followed. The extent to which past procedure is applied could act as a bellwether to whether Xi Jinping is centralising power and authority.

Firstly, the retirement of PSC and Politburo members at the age of 68. This age limit is colloquially known as “Eight down, Seven up”. The retirement age for PSC members was 70 during the 15th Congress in 1997 and lowered to 68 in 2002. (Miller, 2016).

Secondly, new appointments to the PSC have been drawn exclusively from regular members of Politburo. The only 2 exceptions to this ‘rule’ so far were when Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang were appointed at the 17th Party Congress in 2007. Neither of them had previous experience serving on the Politburo, and they were added to prepare them to succeed Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao as General Secretary and Premier respectively in 2012. If the 19th Party Congress will have any exceptions remains to be seen.

This exception follows the third convention, which PSC appointees are among the youngest senior party leaders eligible. With potentially 5 PSC vacancies, two younger appointees might be expected in 2017 so that they can succeed Xi and Li in 2022.

However, these ‘rules’ are only derived from precedence. Elite politics is a ruthless game, irrespective of the political system.

But while sensational headlines about factional politics and personal rivalries please the crowds, the CCP tends to value continuity and procedure over change. As indicated by Deng Xiaoping himself, “party leadership transition should be institutionalised and thoroughly consulted and examined” (Deng, 1980). The Party typically makes the most important

decisions via collective leadership: a hard lesson learnt after the decade long traumatic period of the Cultural Revolution.³ This sense of continuity helps the top leadership to preserve the Party’s survival and legitimacy.

If the final appointments from the 19th Congress significantly differ from those de-facto ‘rules’ listed above, it could indicate two things. Firstly, the CCP faces a new set of challenges and requires new rules to be introduced to shape the top leadership. Or secondly, the pundits are right, and Xi Jinping has gained substantial personal power which allows him to bypass the collective leadership system endorsed by Deng and choose appointees based on his own personal taste. However, there has thus far been little evidence from the official media to act as an early warning of such a seismic shift.

WHAT WILL BE INCLUDED IN THE 19TH CONGRESS POLITICAL REPORT?

As mentioned above, personnel appointments and reshuffles are not the only critical business to be discussed and decided at the Party Congress. Another key function for the Congress is to discuss a lengthy ‘political report’ delivered by the CCP General Secretary on behalf of the outgoing Central Committee.

Bland as its name may be, this political report is the most authoritative public account of the CCP’s policy on all major policy fronts. It contains a laundry list of key

policies undertaken by the outgoing Central Committee in the past five years, and puts forward guidance for future policy in all relevant sectors. Over 22,000 words long in English (Xinhua 2012b), much of which is jargon, it's not a page turner you'd want as your bedside read. But the political report shouldn't be overlooked.

It largely represents the CCP collective leadership, as well as what the Party thinks in general. The 19th Congress report should not be considered Xi Jinping's personal views, nor should it be counted as another of Xi's speech to his comrades. Like any other key functions of the Party Congress, the political report carries a strong sense of continuity, while reflecting some either moderate or radical departures from the past based on what has happened in the last five years when the previous Congress assembled.

Given its sheer breadth and width, a political report takes almost 12 months to draft and be reviewed by all the relevant stakeholders (Xinhua 2012a). Those who can participate in reviewing process are: regular Politburo members, Central Committee members, retired Party grandees, a limited number of academics, and some selected non-Party members. Drafting the political report is a strenuous effort to include all interested groups' voices.

The Congress political report sheds some light on competition amongst senior party members and compromises amongst vested interest groups, through the development of flexible formulations to allow different

factions to agree with one another. It's a summary of the party's achievements and plans expressed as lowest common denominator of consensus in the party at Zhongnanhai (Headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party).

Looking at the political reports from the past three Congresses, there is a relatively standard formula with lots of continuation in the report structure. It includes sections on the party's 'works', ideological discussion, economics, domestic politics, foreign affairs, cultural reform, and social developments. Perhaps surprisingly, the reports still adhere to a Marxist-Leninist approach - with economics and the means of production as the 'base', and politics and society coming later as the 'superstructure'.

Expect Xi's 19th Congress political report to show a lot of continuity with the previous report by his predecessor Hu Jintao. For example, the section of Hu's report to the 18th Congress on the Party's overall goals for next five years required "comprehensively deepening reforms and opening in pursuit of a moderately prosperous society" (Xinhua 2012b). Xi has put forward a series of initiatives in explicit response to Hu's report, including providing 300 detailed reform steps at the 18th Congress' third plenum, and will be judged on progress towards Hu's goals.

In the 19th Congress report, Xi will also reveal some either moderate or radical differences from the previous report, to reflect new challenges and new political realities in the last five years. Until this particular political

report published, one cannot assess the concrete implications of those shifts from the past.

According to the recent official media coverage, the 19th Congress report may devote expanded sections on party discipline, economic supply-side policies, environmental issues and foreign affairs. And it wouldn't be a surprise to see a reference to the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, Xi's signature policy initiative of the past few years (Yu, 2017). How much is he able to stamp his own policy agenda on this report is another test of his power and authority within the Party.

WILL THE PARTY CONSTITUTION INCLUDE 'XI JINPING THOUGHT'?

One of the key questions for the global media is if Xi will incorporate a new doctrine of so-called "Xi Jinping thought" when the CCP revises its Party Constitution during the 19th Congress (Xinhua, 2017). This would essentially state that one of the party's policy principles would be to follow Xi's ideas. Any "successful revision to add Xi Jinping Thought as the Party's guiding ideology would confirm Xi's consolidation of supreme power because he puts himself on a par with Mao" (Nikkei Asian Review, 2017; SCMP, 2017).

However, "there have been occasional references scattered in low-level PRC media over the past five years to 'Xi Jinping Thought'; there have been none in authoritative leadership statements or

commentary. References to Xi's thinking on specific policy sectors appeared occasionally" (Miller, 2017).

Expect the party constitution to make reference to Xi's policies on party discipline and prepare him to enter the pantheon of the Party's guiding ideology like his predecessors together with Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. But it remains to be seen how the Party will revise its constitution and what exact choice of the words appears in the official media's 19th Congress coverage, either with his name attached or not.

This will be another clear benchmark to assess Xi and its team's power and authority. As there have been no particular explicit reference to "Xi Jinping Thought" in any official media coverage, any revisions from the October gathering will be credited to a collective leadership of 18th Central Committee not just Xi himself.

CONCLUSION

The CCP Congress remains one of the world's most complex political gatherings and fascinates not just China watchers but also global investors and political practitioners in general.

However, much of the discussion in the West is based on arbitrary speculation. An examination of official press coverage, Congress political reports, and Party constitution revision procedures suggest no evidence to indicate that the 19th CCP Congress will radically depart from the

previous de-facto rules and conventions set by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s. The sense of continuity is too prevalent in a ruling Party run by collective leadership through seeking broad consensus to return to one single supreme leader anchoring the show.

Deng Xiaoping's landmark reforms not only built modern China, but also profoundly shaped how the CCP senior cadres are examined and the leadership baton is passed to the each generation of leaders. After nearly 40 years of economic reform at home and a bold opening to the global economy during the 1990s, the world's largest ruling Party faces a new set of challenges and is asking itself where it might be heading.

Within the next five years, China will enter its final stage of achieving its overarching goals of establishing a "moderately prosperous society" by 2020, with the Centenary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021. Domestically, continuous economic growth has produced vested interest groups that refuse to give up their existing power and authority which, together with huge income inequality and appalling air pollution, could challenge the very survival of the Party leadership. On the foreign affairs front, it looks like Deng's approach of "keeping a low profile" is being replaced by Xi Jinping's more proactive approach which seeks to promote Chinese core interests more forcefully while asserting China's 'rightful' status in global order.

Xi clearly knows that he is facing a much higher level of political risk than either of his two predecessors after Deng in both domestic politics and foreign affairs. He needs to strike a fine balance that can satisfy both elites and the ordinary public alike in his second term in office. The 19th CCP congress is inevitably a beginning rather than an end in itself. One can only hope that this Party congress will be based on an innovative reading of the past and a belief that prosperity is not only essential for China's future development, but more importantly the only means to maintain the Party's very own legitimacy and survival. ■

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- 1 These are the Chinese People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress convened in early March every year to discuss the work of central government.
 - 2 Sun Zhengcai, who was the party secretary of Chong Qing, an important municipality, was removed from the Politburo due to discipline breach on 24th July 2017
 - 3 For a full explanation of collective leadership, please refer to the author's piece in From Deng to Xi: Economic Reform, the New Silk Road, and the Return of the Middle Kingdom

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This Strategic Update is the essential guide to the Chinese Communist Party Congress, one of the world's most secretive and exclusive political meetings. It explains who takes part in the Congress, how leadership transitions work, the other important functions of the Congress, and why the world should be watching.

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Dong Fang https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:18th_National_Congress_of_the_Communist_Party_of_China.jpg

