

Raising the Curtain on China's 20th Party Congress: Mechanics, Rules, "Norms," and the Realities of Power

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is preparing to convene its 20th Party Congress in late 2022, and the party apparatus is already in full swing making the necessary arrangements for the political conclave, held every five years. President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping had hoped to tread an easy path toward an atypical third term in power, but unexpected events at home and abroad have complicated that trajectory. Xi would like the congress to mark the beginning of what could be a sustained period of strongman rule, making it one of the most consequential party gatherings in decades:

- Xi has spent his current term laying the groundwork for a major win at the 20th Party Congress. The regime's key power centers are more beholden to him personally than they were five years ago, and Xi has orchestrated a methodical campaign of highly personalized aggrandization of his position within the leadership by garnering progressively more grandiose ideological laureates, making Xi and his policies very difficult to challenge.
 - Xi's third-term gambit leaves him in a much stronger position to dictate outcomes than his two immediate predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, both of whom were preparing to step down from formal office at roughly the same time in their tenure. Xi has
- rewired the regime's policymaking ecosystem to deemphasize the formal government bureaucracy, bolstering his ability to steer a course that is favorable to his personal and policy goals.
- Against this backdrop, this paper reviews the official building blocks that shape what is and is not permissible in CCP politics, as well the mechanics of producing a new top leadership lineup at each party congress, and considers whether these mechanisms might restrict Xi's freedom of action despite his impressive accrual of personal power atop the CCP hierarchy:
- The party's official "rule book," the CCP constitution, has very few actual rules. This is by design: unlike political parties in Western parliamentary or constitutional systems, the CCP does not consider itself subject to frameworks such as the constitution or even the law. As Xi put it starkly in his political work report to the 19th Party Congress, "Government, the military, society and schools, north, south, east and west—the party leads them all." The constitution alone provides few constraints on the exercise of a top leader's power.
 - The party's operational mechanisms for selecting a new leadership cohort appear fairly routinized at first glance, in that there is a specific cadence to

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the selection process. It starts with the establishment of a small and secretive preparatory committee that manages the selection of a few thousand delegates to the congress, oversees the drafting of both the sitting general secretary's work report to the congress and the proposed amendments to the constitution that the conclave will consider, and prepares a list of candidates for membership on the next Central Committee and its senior leadership bodies. The delegates elect the new Central Committee, and it, in turn, immediately elects the new top leadership lineup for the Politburo and its major policymaking, executive, and oversight functions.

- Even within these seemingly static protocols, Xi has made important tweaks to the process of selecting the delegates and the pool of senior leaders. These changes overturn earlier conventions designed to foster greater transparency and open competition in favor of Xi's emphasis on centralization and "top-level design" in nearly all matters of principle, procedure, and policy. Xi's intention to retain formal office may grant him greater control over the functions of the preparatory committee than Jiang and Hu enjoyed after a decade in power because they both had to accommodate a rising successor, whereas Xi does not.

Despite the paucity of hard rules governing Chinese elite politics, some scholars have argued that the leadership generally followed a discrete series of political practices regarding senior leadership promotion and succession, with very little variation, for at least the two decades leading up to the 19th Party Congress in 2017. These

"norms" included, among other things, the clear identification of a successor halfway through the sitting leader's roughly 10 years in power; the strict adherence to age restrictions defining who could serve on the Politburo; and a Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) whose numbers generally aligned with a definable set of senior party portfolios:

- Although Xi is commonly credited with upending several of these norms, deficiencies in both their explanatory and predictive power emerged much earlier. Politburo age restrictions have served as a loose governor on elite competition, for example, but it is important to recall that Jiang Zemin instituted them for purely political purposes, and there is no reason to believe they will not be adjusted again at the 20th or subsequent party congresses. The "norm" around the PBSC's composition appears equally problematic; in fact, the four party congresses (15th–18th) that are generally accepted as the data set for the formulation of "norms" were notable only for their complete lack of a pattern regarding the PBSC.
- Since the 19th Party Congress, Xi's approach has been an inconvenient truth for the analytic power of "norms." Neither Xi's successor nor a premier-in-waiting was identified by rising to the PBSC in 2017; Xi telegraphed his intent to serve at least a third five-year term by abolishing the presidential term limit in 2018; and he showed his disdain for the typical emphasis on stepwise promotion to the Politburo by vaulting several of his associates directly to that body without checking off the boxes that the "norms" would suggest.

Xi seems to relish his reputation as a “doer” who is unafraid to challenge the regime’s most sacred totems.

Consequently, an analytic approach focused solely on mechanics, rules, and “norms” sets its investigative sights in the wrong direction. It emphasizes factors that supposedly constrain a leader’s freedom of action, whereas the exigencies of Leninist politics should focus observers’ attention on the raw exercise of power. Institutions are a meaningful factor in assessing Chinese elite political competition, but Xi’s unique brand of political alchemy lies in knowing how and when to tweak, weaken, or manipulate those institutions to enhance his power, or to simply clothe the naked exercise of raw power in a veneer of regularization. In fact, Xi seems to relish his reputation as a “doer” who is unafraid to challenge the regime’s most sacred totems. His anticorruption effort, massive restructuring of the Chinese military, reshaping of the economy, and pugnacious “wolf warrior” foreign policy all point to a leader who is not bound by convention and who is willing to make big bets, even if they result in “all or nothing” outcomes. Taking this trait as the baseline, it behooves analysts of Chinese elite politics to at least consider nonlinear outcomes and to expect the unexpected from the 20th Party Congress and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

With preparations for this year’s 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in full swing, the attention of full-time China watchers, China dabblers within the broader commentariat, and pundits is starting to focus on this most important of CCP conclaves, held every five years. The stage for high drama at the congress was set as early as March 2018, when Chinese President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping modified the Chinese state constitution to [remove a restriction](#) limiting the president to two five-year terms, clear-

ing the way for Xi to remain in power for a third term, and possibly longer. Xi looked set to cruise to a major victory at the congress, having orchestrated a smooth celebration of the CCP’s 100th birthday in July 2021, followed a few months later, at the Sixth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee, by the passage of a hagiographic resolution on party history that aggrandized Xi’s standing in the party’s ideological hierarchy, putting him ever closer to Mao Zedong. However, several unexpected events—including Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine; the emergence of the omicron variant of COVID-19 in China, which caused mass disruptions including a grinding lockdown in the financial capital of Shanghai; unremitting challenges from abroad in the form of deepening strategic competition with the United States; and a global economy bursting with inflationary pressures—have made the picture far more complex for China and for Xi.

Given the high stakes of the drama that is about to unfold, it is a worthwhile, if challenging, exercise to try to ascertain where Xi may be headed, in terms of the arrangement of the Politburo deck chairs at the party congress and the policy road map that may follow. This series of papers, prepared as part of the Asia Society Policy Institute’s analytic work on Chinese politics, will address these issues in due course. As with any such examination, however, it is difficult to determine the direction of travel without a solid grasp on where one has been before. Much has been said and written about the trajectory of China’s political evolution over the last few decades. This work generally can be summarized as follows: starting with the reforms of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in the aftermath of the ruinous Cultural Revolution (1966–76), succeeding generations of Chinese leaders have, despite a few ups and downs,

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stuck to a consensus approach in which the mechanics of leadership interactions and the handover from one leadership cohort to another have been orderly, notionally rules based, and predictable. Some analysts have even described this evolution as the “institutionalization” of Chinese politics.

But Xi Jinping's tenure as China's top leader has been something of an inconvenient truth for this view. Xi's transformative agenda amounts to nothing less than a fundamental reordering of the Chinese party-state's core structure and its operation, both at home and abroad, over the last several decades. Xi's formative experiences—the exhilaration of a privileged upbringing after the CCP's successful seizure of power in 1949, combined with the tumult stemming from his family's fall from grace in the run-up to the Cultural Revolution—seem to have instilled in him a belief that he is operating in a highly Hobbesian political environment that, when push comes to shove, has very few formal rules, and therefore little predictability or safety. Consequently, Xi's operational style appears to be a winner-take-all approach to the rough-and-tumble world of Chinese Politburo politicking. Guided by a philosophy that can be best described as “political shock and awe,” Xi has:

- Created and now chairs several new high-level CCP policy bodies that have diminished the deliberative role of the regime's formal institutions—most notably, the operational government ministries—in favor of a “kitchen cabinet style” of policy advisory centered on himself.
- Used a powerful coercive toolkit, led by a relentless anticorruption drive and sweeping organizational restructuring, to ensure that the regime's prin-

cipal power centers—the propaganda machinery, the party apparatus, and the military and security services—operate as instruments wielded by Xi in an unflinchingly hierarchical world of CCP power and control rather than as powerful, highly autonomous fiefdoms.

- Broken the lingering authority of his retired peers, making it nearly impossible for them to intervene in policymaking behind the scenes or in traditionally informal settings such as the Politburo's annual Beidaihe policy retreat.
- Begun a methodical campaign of highly personalized aggrandization of his position within the leadership by garnering progressively more grandiose ideological laureates, making Xi and his policies very difficult to challenge.

Against this backdrop, it is useful to review our understanding of the procedural building blocks of convening a party congress and to think about whether and how Xi's particular political ecosystem has impacted what appears to be a highly routinized and choreographed process for producing the slate of top officials who will rule China for at least the next five years, and perhaps longer. Therefore, this paper aims to do the following:

- Present an overview of the procedures for producing a new CCP Central Committee, Politburo, Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), and top leader.
- Briefly examine the party's actual “rule book”—the CCP constitution—for an understanding of the party's organizational sine qua nons based on the procedures and outcomes that it has codified as unconditional rules (hint: there are very few of them).

Given the near certainty that Xi will remain in command beyond the 20th Party Congress, his control over the planning is likely to be stronger compared with congresses when the sitting leader was set to retire after 10 years in power.

- Review the key takeaways from the extensive literature on Chinese elite politics, much of which argues that the leadership generally has followed a discrete series of identifiable political practices regarding senior leadership promotion and succession, with little variation for at least two decades, and analyze its current explanatory power.
- Examine the notorious black box of Chinese elite political decision-making to get a sense of how the realities of power in a closed political system like the CCP effect its structures individually and collectively, and to derive from that exercise some sense of how disruptive (or not) an outcome observers should expect from the 20th Party Congress.

A QUICK LOOK UNDER THE HOOD

Although outside observers are just beginning to focus on the 20th Party Congress, the CCP has been making preparations since late 2021. Most of the attention, rightly so, was on the party history resolution passed at the Sixth Plenum last November; however, the same session also announced in its communiqué that the 20th Party Congress would convene “[in the second half of 2022.](#)” Judging by [past precedent](#), a meeting of the Politburo soon after the plenum will have established a preparatory committee for the party congress. The work of the preparatory committee is never publicly acknowledged until after the party congress closes, but it is an essential building block for ensuring that the conclave comes off without a hitch, and it is a key mechanism through which the sitting leader puts his stamp on the congress’s outcomes. Given the near certainty that Xi will remain in command beyond the 20th Party Congress, his control over the planning is likely to

be stronger compared with congresses when the sitting leader was set to retire after 10 years in power. Xi undoubtedly will chair the group, and PBSC member and ideology czar Wang Huning is expected to serve as vice chair. The other deputy is less certain, but if precedent holds, it could be PBSC member and Executive Vice Premier Han Zheng. The committee will oversee [four basic tasks](#):

- The election of the [2,300 delegates](#) who will attend the Party Congress.
- The establishment and management of the drafting committee for the political work report that Xi Jinping will deliver to the congress in his capacity as CCP general secretary. The work report sums up and provides an accounting of the outgoing Central Committee’s work over the preceding five years, but it also conveys the party’s most authoritative representation of its policies on all major matters. That rendering of judgment and articulation of priorities will be especially important this year, given the turbulence buffeting the regime and Xi’s plans to remain firmly in charge.
- The establishment and management of the group formulating proposed changes to the CCP constitution that will be deliberated at the congress. Here, all eyes are likely to be on Xi’s desire to truncate his current, clunky ideological formulation of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” to the pithier “Xi Jinping Thought,” putting him alone alongside Mao in the CCP’s ideological pantheon.
- The preparation of a list of candidates for membership on the 20th Central Committee of the CCP and its senior

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leadership bodies, including the PBSC; the full Politburo; the Politburo's executive arm, the CCP Secretariat; the party's antigraft watchdog, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC); and the Central Military Commission (CMC), the CCP's military policy-setting organ.

On the heels of the Sixth Plenum, the sitting Central Committee [promulgated](#) the "Notice on the Election of Deputies to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," which laid out the procedures for selecting the delegates to the congress. That process is now complete across the country. Despite the notice's references to multicandidate elections, the election process is tightly scripted by the CCP's Organization Department, the party's personnel arm. In fact, some of the delegate selection procedures meant to foster greater transparency and open competition under the party's umbrella [that were used](#) at pre-Xi era party congresses [no longer apply](#). As with the last congress, this year's will convene under Xi's sole stewardship, in keeping with the broad trend of his administration toward greater centralization and "top-level design" in pretty much all matters of principle and policy.

The delegates selected will include incumbent top CCP leaders, cabinet ministers, and senior military generals, as well as so-called grassroots representatives from all walks of life, including workers, scientists, entrepreneurs, farmers, and sports figures. At the opening of the congress, Xi will deliver the political work report. The delegates will then deliberate on the work report and the proposed amendments to the party constitution over the next several days. At the close of the congress, the delegates will elect a new Central Committee, composed of roughly 200 members with full voting rights and 150

alternates who, though they lack a proper vote, still can attend high-level party meetings such as Central Committee plenums and are available to replace full members if they die in office or are purged during the Central Committee's tenure. The Central Committee list will provide important clues about which leaders may be in line for top posts, and the amount of turnover within the Central Committee—generally around [60 percent](#)—may signal how aggressively Xi intends to reshuffle. The day after it is seated, the new Central Committee will hold its first plenum, where it, in turn, will elect the new Politburo and PBSC, as well as the Secretariat, CDIC, and CMC.

A RULEBOOK WITH NO (MEANINGFUL) RULES

Unlike political parties in Western parliamentary or constitutional systems, the CCP does not consider itself subject to frameworks such as the constitution or even the law. [Put simply](#), the CCP describes itself as the definer and guardian of the law rather than an organization that is subordinate to it. This view has been articulated and repeatedly underscored throughout Xi Jinping's time in office. For example, in the "Decision Concerning Some Major Questions in Comprehensively Promoting Governing the Country According to Law," [passed](#) at the Fourth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in October 2014, the leadership underscored that "party leadership and socialist rule of law are identical; socialist rule of law must persist in party leadership, party leadership must rely on socialist rule of law." Xi put it even more directly in his work report to the 19th Party Congress: "Government, the military, society and schools, north, south, east and west—the party leads them all."

The party does have "rules" in the form of regulations, procedures, and guidelines, and

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Xi has made it a hallmark of his tenure to clarify and promulgate these types of rules. But when it comes to rules that meaningfully constrain the activities of the party's top powerbrokers, its "rule book"—the CCP constitution—has very few. In fact, a review of it shows that, aside from a largely platitudinous listing of the duties of party cadres, the number of true rules can be counted on one hand, with one finger left over:

1. The constitution mandates that the Central Committee convene the National Congress of the CCP every five years, except in extraordinary circumstances.
2. The Central Committee of the CCP is required to meet in plenary session at least once a year, and such sessions are convened by its Political Bureau.
3. The general secretary of the Central Committee must be a member of the PBSC.
4. Party cadres are not entitled to lifetime tenure.

ABNORMAL "NORMS"

Some scholars have argued that despite the paucity of hard rules governing Chinese elite politics, the leadership nonetheless followed a discrete series of identifiable political practices regarding senior leadership promotion and succession, with little variation, for at least the two decades leading up to the 19th Party Congress in 2017. Although this is not an exhaustive list, these customs, generally described by proponents of this analytic construct as "norms," include the following:

- The sitting top leader of the Party will serve no more than two five-year terms as CCP general secretary before handing that post over to a successor.

- That successor will be publicly identified by advancing to the PBSC at the party congress marking the midpoint of the sitting party chief's decade-long tenure and by inheriting key posts¹ that clearly mark him as understudy to the top leader.
- As a form of valediction and recognition of service, the outgoing leader's contribution to the party's "guiding ideology" will be enshrined in the CCP constitution.
- Advancement to—or retention on—the full Politburo will be governed by a potential candidate's age at the time of the respective party congress. In its current iteration, followed since the 16th Party Congress in 2002, leaders who are 68 at the time of the next congress should step down, while those 67 or younger may be added or remain ("seven up, eight down," or 七上八下).
- The number of seats on the PBSC roughly coincides with a set of defined senior leadership portfolios such as party chief, the premier, head of the legislature, ideology czar, and so on.
- Candidates for the Politburo will have demonstrated their suitability for promotion to the party's highest ranks through an often decades-long series of stepwise promotions from the lowest rungs of the CCP bureaucracy, frequently having served in some combination of increasingly senior positions within the central party apparatus, the state ministries or state machinery, and in the localities. Checking the correct technocratic boxes therefore may be just as important as a hopeful's actual leadership abilities. They also will

¹ These typically include the chief secretary of the CCP Secretariat—the executive arm of the Politburo—the state vice presidency, and, later, a vice chairmanship on the CMC.

“Government, the military, society and schools, north, south, east and west—the party leads them all.”

advance predictably in rough generational cohorts.

Xi Jinping is commonly credited with upending several of these norms during his tenure, but problems with their predictive power emerged much earlier. It is generally accepted that age restrictions, for example, were introduced at the 15th Party Congress in 1997, when the age limit for Politburo membership was set at 70 (top leader Jiang Zemin was given a critical exemption). Five years later, at the 16th Party Congress, the age limit was reduced to 68—with no exemptions granted—and the same restriction seems to have been applied at the 17th (2007), 18th (2012), and 19th (2017) Party Congresses, lending some credibility to its standing as a “norm.”

Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that both of these age restrictions were put in place during Jiang Zemin’s tenure in power, and it is well-known that it was done primarily for political purposes. In 1997, Jiang used it to dispatch fellow PBSC member Qiao Shi, who had frequently scuffled with Jiang politically and whose long tenure overseeing the regime’s security services gave him at least a modicum of political clout. In 2002, it was Li Ruihuan’s turn, another longtime PBSC peer and critic of Jiang’s and the last standard bearer for the CCP’s ardent political reform wing. Moreover, given the utter political invisibility of Jiang’s successor—former President Hu Jintao—after relinquishing the top spot to Xi in 2012, it may, in retrospect, be more likely that Hu’s decision to adhere to the “seven up, eight down” principle at both the 17th and 18th Party Congresses lay more in his political impotence than in his commitment to political norms.

The “norm” that the PBSC’s composition is related to a discrete set of senior leader-

ship policy portfolios is also problematic. During the four party congresses (15th–18th) that are generally accepted as the data set for the formulation of “norms,” the composition of the PBSC was noteworthy for its lack of a pattern. It had seven members in the 15th Politburo; Jiang Zemin expanded it to nine in the 16th; that held for the 17th; and then it shrunk again to seven for the 18th. Some analysts have used institutional arguments to explain these changes—for example, suggesting that the expansion to nine members in 2002 represented a recognition that, with China’s nascent rise, the party was [facing certain challenges at home and abroad](#) that required a greater focus on certain policy portfolios. Similarly, trimming the PBSC to seven members in 2012 was meant to give Xi Jinping more room to make difficult decisions by shrinking the number of seats at the decision-making table to decrease the likelihood of gridlock.

But it seems clear, at least in the case of the PBSC’s expansion at the 16th Party Congress, that [power politics](#) provides a better explanation, just as it does for the changes in age restrictions during Jiang’s tenure. There is no reason that the seven-member PBSC configuration that has held for the last two party congresses might not be adjusted again this fall. It could be expanded again, or shrunk to perhaps five members, with a modest adjustment of the existing portfolios—an outcome that was floated, [at least in media accounts](#), ahead of the 19th Party Congress. In short, analyses relying on [routinized organizational processes](#) or promotions based on [work experience or age cohorts](#) alone have proven poor predictors of actual outcomes over time.

As alluded to earlier, Xi Jinping’s tenure from the 19th Party Congress onward has eroded the explanatory power of several of these

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norms and laid the groundwork for doing so with others:

- Neither a successor nor a premier-in-waiting was identified by promotion to the PBSC in 2017, and Xi telegraphed his intent to serve at least a third five-year term by abolishing the presidential term limit in 2018. He also showed his disdain for the emphasis on stepwise promotion by elevating two of his close associates—Beijing Municipal CCP Secretary Cai Qi and Chongqing Municipal CCP Secretary Chen Min'er—directly to the Politburo, vaulting them up two administrative ranks in less than five years, and by promoting others to the Politburo without previous service on the full Central Committee.
- The first step toward enshrining “Xi Jinping Thought” in the party constitution signaled Xi’s preference for apotheosis rather than valediction in the theoretical realm, and the elaboration of key catchphrases—the “Two Establishments” and the “Two Safeguards”—in the party history resolution adopted at the Sixth Plenum focused on the incontestability and preservation of Xi’s supremacy in the leadership, marking a critical next step in that direction. As CCP media analyst [David Bandurski](#) put it in February 2022, these latest forays “brought a century of Party experience into focus in the person, power, and theoretical genius of Xi Jinping—an act of ideational concentration meant both to symbolize and actualize Xi’s dominance into 2022 and beyond.”
- Xi seemed to largely honor the “norms” related to the composition of the

PBSC and the idea of age restrictions, although that may say more about his pragmatism in weighting his priorities than their ultimate durability as norms. In fact, the seed was planted for further adjustments to or outright abandonment of age restrictions even before the 19th Party Congress: at a press conference following the Sixth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in 2016—which anointed Xi as the party’s “core” leader—a senior official from the CCP General Office [dismissed as “folklore”](#) the idea that there is a binding rule on age, describing such conventions as “party practices that can sometimes be adjusted as needed.” Age restrictions should also work in both directions if they are a valid “norm”; all of the members of the 18th Politburo who were older than 67 did retire, but three who were not were inexplicably dropped from the 19th Politburo, poking a big hole in the notion of predictable advancement by generational cohort.

UNCHARTED WATERS

As part of the ideological and personal aggrandizement campaign around Xi in his bid to equal Mao in the party pantheon, Xi has been described in authoritative party documents as [“the pilot at the helm”](#) of the metaphorical CCP ship of state, edging toward Mao’s famous sobriquet as the “great helmsman.” This analogy is particularly apt as Xi prepares to navigate political waters untested since the height of Mao’s power. In the same way that Xi has engaged in a step-by-step campaign to prepare for his ideological crowning at the 20th Party Congress, so, too, has he made important tweaks to the mechanics and the rules around party congress politicking designed to maximize his

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freedom of action at the party conclave:

- Following the 17th Party Congress, official Chinese media published [an account](#) of new procedures used to select candidates for the Politburo approved at the first plenum of the new central committee. Under a process called “democratic recommendation” (民主推荐), the Party several months before the Congress conducted a straw poll of 200 candidates eligible for Politburo membership, and the results of that ballot factored into the final candidate list for the new Politburo which then was presented to the Party Congress. This process was repeated in the run-up to the 18th Party Congress, according to an [official account](#) in People’s Daily.
- For the 19th Party Congress—the first under Xi’s direct stewardship—however, the process of democratic recommendation was abandoned and [sharply denounced](#) for promoting “voting based on personal connections and favors,” and even vote buying by candidates such as Zhou Yongkang, Sun Zhengcai, and Ling Jihua, all senior leaders who ultimately were purged for corruption. Instead, a process of “face-to-face interviews, investigation and study” was used to select candidates. Xi Jinping personally interviewed 57 officials, and “relevant leading comrades of the CCP Central Committee” spoke with another 258 officials, while senior CMC members interviewed 32 field commander-grade officers for the two uniformed candidates for the new Politburo. The revised procedure, which People’s Daily lauded for “constantly improving the mechanism of gener-

ating the party’s and the country’s leaders,” undoubtedly tightened Xi’s personal grip over the selection process through narrowing the field of candidates and the special status given to his personal role in the interview process.

- Xi’s revision of the state constitution to remove term limits on the presidency created at least a notional precedent for changes to the few actual rules in the party constitution highlighted earlier, given that the constitution is revised at each party congress. Although it is unlikely that even Xi would be bold enough to call for dropping the ban on lifetime tenure, for example, perhaps the mere possibility that he might do so in the minds of other CCP power-brokers gives him more leverage in the horse trading over other critical outcomes to be revealed after the congress. Although not a specific rule change, Xi’s [rumored interest](#) in bringing back the Mao-era party chairmanship would require reintroducing it into the constitution, a major modification given its absence there since 1982.
- Xi must also decide what to do about the “seven up, eight down” principle. If it is strictly maintained, then he can no longer serve on the Politburo. This seems almost unimaginable, as, among other things, it would violate the constitution’s rule that the CCP general secretary be a member of the PBSC (unless, of course, Xi were to vacate that post, or the constitution were revised to eliminate that rule). He could take a page from Jiang Zemin’s book and arrange for “spontaneous calls” that he be granted an exemption, but he may also wish to “adjust this party practice,”

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as suggested in 2016. By lowering the age cutoff by just a year, for example, Xi could eliminate three current PBSC members from other leadership interest groups—Li Keqiang, Wang Yang, and Wang Huning—from the next Politburo, granting him a freer hand to stack the next top leadership group with his allies.

Against this backdrop, the party's mechanics, rules, and "norms" can be viewed, at best, as vague guidelines and conventions that help map the rough contours of the outcomes of the 20th Party Congress. To give just one example, the leadership may choose to repeat the "face-to-face interviews, investigation, and study" approach to candidate selection for the next Politburo, or there may be new twists in that process that "constantly improv[e] the mechanism of generating the party's and the country's leaders." The only certainty is that outside observers will remain clueless about the procedures unless and until the CCP chooses to shed light on them after the congress closes.

But that does not mean analysts should throw up their hands and wait for all to be revealed. There is no doubt that the black box of CCP elite politics has gotten even more opaque under Xi's rule. With his status as "chairman of everything," the circle of trust and knowledge is very small, and Xi's preference for informal policymaking means that dashed lines of authority and influence often trump more formal structures. And yet, above all, the record of the last five party congresses underscores the reality that power politics remains the sine qua non of Leninist systems like China's:

- Jiang Zemin made a near art form of last-minute masterstrokes to enhance

his position and ensure durable influence well after his formal retirement. With the connivance of deceased party elder Bo Yibo, Jiang [reportedly](#) engineered his own retention and Qiao Shi's ouster even as the 15th Party Congress had already convened; he repeated the formula at the 16th to usher out Li Ruihuan. Even a full decade after his formal retirement, Jiang seized on [the scandal](#) that engulfed Hu Jintao's chief of staff, Ling Jihua, to facilitate his push at the 18th Party Congress for a PBSC still dominated by his associates. Despite his otherwise lackluster rule, Hu Jintao tried his hand at power politics ahead of the 17th Party Congress with his purge of Chen Liangyu, then party boss of Shanghai, on corruption charges.

- With the wind at his back following the collapse of would-be rival Bo Xilai in the run-up to his accession at the 18th Party Congress, Xi's withering anticorruption campaign allowed him to consolidate power quickly with the purge of several former top leaders over his first few years in office. Xi wielded his anti-graft scythe again in the critical period just before the 19th Party Congress, felling sitting Politburo member Sun Zhengcai and CMC members Fang Fanghui and Zhang Yang, all of whom were marked for possible Politburo seats according to the "norms."
- Xi has continued his efforts in advance of this year's congress; his hatchet man Chen Yixin has been [overseeing](#) a nearly two-year "education and rectification" campaign in the party's security and legal bureaucracy that is clearing the way for Xi to finally put

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that critical lever of power under his personal control. In mid-June, Xi presided over a Politburo “[study session](#)” on anticorruption, emphasizing that “members of the Politburo must uphold the highest standards as far as self-discipline is concerned . . . and resolutely refrain from doing whatever the party prohibits its members from doing.” That meeting followed on the heels of a [proper Politburo meeting](#) examining the crackdown on malfeasance in the financial sector, long the playground of business activity by elite families.

In short, an analytic approach focused on mechanics, rules, and “norms” emphasizes factors that supposedly constrain a leader's freedom of action, whereas the exigencies of Leninist politics should focus observers' attention on the actual exercise of power. This is not to suggest that Xi Jinping will be unconstrained in directing the outcomes of the 20th Party Congress. Even he has called for “power to be kept in a cage of regulation,” underscoring that institutions, if only of a sort, are a meaningful factor governing Chinese politics. The difference, and arguably Xi's unique brand of political alchemy, is knowing how and when to tweak, weaken, and/or manipulate those institutions to enhance the leader's power, or when to clothe the naked wielding of raw power in a veneer of regularization. Xi has made no secret of his disdain for the practices and procedures of the overly collective leadership model that preceded his arrival. As the party history resolution put in none-too-subtle terms, under that model, “big problems that needed to be solved for a long time have not been solved,” and “many big things that have wanted to be done have not been done in the past.” In other words, Xi is a “doer,” unafraid to challenge the regime's most sacred totems. His anticor-

ruption effort, massive restructuring of the Chinese military, reshaping of the economy, and pugnacious “wolf warrior” foreign policy all point to a leader who is unbound by convention and willing to make big bets, even if they might result in “all or nothing” outcomes. Whether that inclination makes Xi a disruptor, or just a reversion to the Platonic ideal of a Leninist ruler after lengthy experimentation with alternatives, is for scholars to debate. As a man on a mission, however, Xi begs analysts to think about nonlinear outcomes and to expect the unexpected.