

## China's 20th Party Congress Leadership Reshuffle: Stasis or Sweep?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Christopher K. Johnson** is



Senior Fellow  
on Chinese  
Politics at the  
Asia Society  
Policy  
Institute's  
Center  
for China

Analysis. He is also the President and CEO of China Strategies Group, a political risk consulting firm. As one of the top China experts in the field, his insights frequently are sought out by the world's leading corporate, financial, and other business interests to help develop strategies for clients pursuing opportunities in China and regionally. Chris also serves as a senior fellow in the office of the president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

### ABOUT THE CENTER FOR CHINA ANALYSIS

With a solution-oriented mandate, the Asia Society Policy Institute (ASPI) tackles major policy challenges confronting the Asia-Pacific in security, prosperity, sustainability, and the development of common norms and values for the region. As part of ASPI, the Center for China Analysis (CCA) serves as a leading global center for policy-relevant, objective analysis of China's politics, economy, and society, and its impact on the region and the world in an era of growing strategic competition.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping successfully thwarted another “Twitter coup” in late September 2022, making clear he will remain China's top leader for at least the next five years. But there is much less certainty about who else will make up the new leadership team at the 20th Party Congress that will assist Xi in guiding the country through its most challenging period in decades. There are virtually no hard rules in CCP politicking limiting the range of possible outcomes, and even the “norms” that are often cited as governing the process of choosing a new leadership lineup are, at best, loose conventions rather than predictable practices. Xi's extreme centralization of power also means that China's already deeply opaque political system is even more so, and more than two and a half years of COVID isolation for China has made it much more challenging to glean authoritative insights.

Nevertheless, one still gets a very clear sense that the personnel arrangements for the party congress are largely in hand, and that Xi Jinping is firmly in command and very comfortable with them. If we accept that as the baseline, it is possible to deduce the most likely scenarios for personnel turnover at the apex of CCP power and decision-making, the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). As with so many things in Xi Jinping's unique political universe, it seems that the outcome will probably be one of two fairly binary, and perhaps nearly equally likely, possibilities. The first, a “stasis” scenario, would see

very little change to the PBSC as Xi either strictly adheres to the convention, followed since 2002, that officials 68 or older must retire, or largely abides by it except for some PBSC incumbents, most probably Premier Li Keqiang, who may step down even though he is 67. In the second “sweep” scenario, Xi could adjust the age criteria downward or just outright ignore it, creating a lot more room for new entrants to the PBSC:

- The case for stasis in the PBSC — where as many as five of the current seven members would be reselected for another five-year term — rests on the assumption that Xi ranks a major revamp to it fairly low in his hierarchy of priorities for the congress. After all, there is little evidence that the current PBSC members have demonstrated much ability, and perhaps even desire, to push for policy approaches other than Xi's preferred course. Modest turnover in the PBSC would still leave Xi the chance to reward his closest followers with promotions from the full Politburo.
- A relatively static PBSC lets Xi postpone the succession question through at least 2027, contributing to his reputation for inscrutability in a way that facilitates his constant drive to enhance his political mystique. Xi is also well aware of domestic and foreign market expectations that a non-Xi-dominated PBSC may portend a return to more pragmatic economic policies. Thus, Xi has incentives to reward those

The case for a Xi sweep of the PBSC is based on the assumption that his non-personnel-related objectives for the congress are already so far advanced that he believes he has a virtually free hand to stack the PBSC with his loyalists.

perceptions in the hope of securing a bounce in market confidence that would serve as a welcome antidote to the “[China is uninvestible](#)” headline that has dominated foreign media for much of the last year.

- The case for a Xi sweep of the PBSC is based on the assumption that his non-personnel-related objectives for the congress are already so far advanced that he believes he has a virtually free hand to stack the PBSC with his loyalists. Such a scenario seems consistent with Xi’s self-image as a bold and transformational figure, as opposed to a calculating plodder like his immediate predecessors. Xi may also be inclined to clean house in the PBSC to keep his lieutenants motivated and loyal; his network of associates has proven more extensive than most observers initially believed, and without creating substantial headroom, many of them could miss their last chance to reach the apex of party power.

As to the reshuffle of the full Politburo and other leading CCP organs, Xi will focus on maintaining and deepening his grip on the key levers of power within the CCP’s control ecosystem while simultaneously expanding his = substantial majority on the Politburo and his sway within the CCP machinery. Xi’s preoccupation with an expansive definition of “comprehensive national security” arguably puts an even higher premium on bringing these organs more firmly under his personal control:

- Xi already has made strong headway in taming the Chinese military, and his allies will certainly dominate the new high command and the senior officer

corps representation on the Politburo. Progress in the regime’s security, legal, and intelligence agencies has been spotty during Xi’s first decade in power, but he seems poised to bring those institutions to heel and to place his lieutenants in charge of that bureaucracy’s oversight mechanism for a net gain on the Politburo.

- In both the PBSC and the full Politburo, Xi presumably will want to take more personal control of the portfolios overseeing ideology, party discipline, and the Politburo’s executive agencies. This would require retiring or moving the current PBSC members with those responsibilities and placing loyalists in position to succeed his lieutenants, who would backfill for the displaced PBSC members. Xi will also want to control the party personnel arm, the CCP Secretariat, and the Politburo’s administrative nerve center, the General Office. The Politburo seats representing key Chinese municipal and provincial centers will offer Xi even more chances to run up his majority on the full Politburo.

A troublesome narrative in circulation concerning the new leadership lineup is that “more Xi” automatically equals more statism in the regime’s management of both the society and the economy, while “less Xi” increases the likelihood of looser control and more market-oriented economic approaches. This idea is especially strong as it relates to Xi’s allies taking up key posts overseeing China’s battered economy, as opposed to promoting allegedly rival factional lieutenants to manage those portfolios:

- The idea is that these notional opponents will push back on Xi’s

The problem with this narrative is that it presupposes that there is a viable alternative political faction in former President Hu Jintao's rump political network based loosely on officials who spent time in the Communist Youth League, when the bulk of the available evidence makes clear that the grouping has become meaningfully defunct.

statist tendencies and his neuralgia concerning national security and self-sufficiency as the sine qua nons of China's economic development to deliver more pragmatic and private-sector-friendly approaches going forward.

- The problem with this narrative is that it presupposes that there is a viable alternative political faction in former President Hu Jintao's rump political network based loosely on officials who spent time in the Communist Youth League, when the bulk of the available evidence makes clear that the grouping has become meaningfully defunct after a series of setbacks and pogroms largely orchestrated by Xi. The narrative also assumes that this “savior premier” — most likely current PBSC member Wang Yang or Vice Premier and Politburo member Hu Chunhua — is willing and able to challenge Xi and retains any pro-market proclivities he may have demonstrated in the past despite serving under Xi's watchful eye in the stilted ecosystem of Beijing for at least the last five years.

The notion that the PBSC matters less than it did under previous Chinese leaders has potentially profound policy implications, but it is consistent with the broad pattern in Xi's political revamp of replacing formal structures with informal ones and once solid lines of political authority with dotted ones. It forces analysts to confront the reality that the world has not dealt with a CCP leader with the type of authority Mao had for decades, in both its positive and negative aspects, and certainly not one leading a country much more powerful and consequential than during Mao's time. The prospect for markets to be whipsawed depending on the outcome

of the leadership sweepstakes underscores this reality. Exploring the contours of what this might mean for policy trajectories after the party congress may feel incongruous right now, especially with the stifling policy inertia that seems to have gripped the Chinese system during the run-up to the party congress and the deep sense of economic and geopolitical uncertainty. Nevertheless, to not do so in an already challenging global environment is a sure recipe for unwelcome strategic surprises.

## INTRODUCTION

President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping miraculously survived yet another “Twitter coup” in late September 2022, leaving even his most ardent detractors in the world of China watchers and the broader commentariat increasingly resigned to the fact that he will remain China's paramount leader when the curtain falls on the 20th Party Congress in late October. With that issue effectively settled, it is natural that attention has now turned to who will join Xi at the apex of power in the CCP to run the world's emerging superpower for the next five years and possibly beyond. The focus is on the makeup of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), China's top decision-making body, and what its new lineup might tell us about Xi's power.

Indeed, many analysts appear to be looking at the new PBSC as an instant “win-loss” barometer of Xi's influence, despite the fact that he has several other objectives for the meeting that he sees as equally important to dominating the retooled PBSC. These include truncating his current, rather clunky ideological formulation — “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” — to the pithier “Xi Jinping Thought”; formally granting Xi new titles

Xi has worked assiduously to position himself not as *primus inter pares*, but just plain *primus*.

or honorifics, such as CCP chairman, “people’s leader,” “navigator,” or “helmsman,” analogous to those previously reserved for the regime’s founding father, Mao Zedong; and orchestrating a substantial down-ballot triumph by his allies on the full Politburo, where the competition for Xi’s probable successor is most likely to take shape. Xi undoubtedly views these goals as a menu of choices to be emphasized or de-emphasized as they best contribute to his principal aim, which is to use the 20th Party Congress as a platform for further articulating his leadership supremacy. Whether Xi takes an à la carte approach or goes for the full buffet, a proper determination of his success at the conclave must take these other elements into account.

There also is the very real question of whether the composition of the PBSC — and perhaps even the body itself — matters as much as it did before the advent of Xi’s “New Era.” If, for example, Xi does achieve the next level of ideological aggrandizement and is formally granted one or more new or resurrected offices or laureates that cumulatively put him on a par with Mao, it is difficult to see how any one PBSC member, or perhaps even a group of them, would be able to meaningfully challenge Xi’s policies. As Chongqing Party School Professor [Su Wei told the \*Global Times\*](#) in January 2018, just in relation to describing Xi as “leader” (领袖 *lingxiu*), “The word *lingxiu* means more than just a leader. It is often bestowed to a leader who enjoys the highest prestige, who is the most capable and who is widely recognized by the entire Party.” In other words, Xi has worked assiduously to position himself not as *primus inter pares*, but just plain *primus*.

Another troublesome narrative in circulation concerning the new leadership lineup

is that “more Xi” automatically equals more statism in the regime’s management of both the society and the economy, while “less Xi” increases the likelihood of looser control and more market-oriented economic approaches. This idea is especially strong as it relates to Xi’s allies taking up key posts — such as premier, executive vice premier, and vice premier managing the financial sector and day-to-day economic operations — overseeing China’s battered economy, as opposed to promoting allegedly rival factional lieutenants, such as PBSC member Wang Yang or Vice Premier and Politburo member Hu Chunhua, to manage those portfolios. The speculation is that these factional opponents would push back against Xi’s statist tendencies and his preoccupations with national security and self-sufficiency as the sine quans of China’s economic development by pressing for more pragmatic and private-sector-friendly approaches going forward.

The problem with this narrative, however, is that it rests on a number of questionable, and perhaps outright fallacious, assumptions. The first is the supposition that there is still a Communist Youth League faction that is a meaningful force in CCP politics in any real sense. Another is that officials such as Wang Yang and Hu Chunhua fundamentally disagree with Xi’s policy choices and that they would be willing to challenge him to force a change in course. This idea presumes that Xi is a monolithic statist and ideologue who is incapable of making adjustments to his preferred policy course in the face of new developments or information. Moreover, it ignores the fairly reasonable proposition that Xi might be just as likely, and probably more so, to adopt policy suggestions from allies he trusts than from those who lack obvious personal ties to him. In short, it would behoove observers to understand that the die is not forever cast, regard-



There are virtually no hard rules limiting the range of outcomes, and even the “norms” that are often cited as governing the process are, at best, loose conventions rather than predictable practices.

less of who ultimately ends up stewarding the economy after the party congress.

### THE PBSC LINEUP: STASIS OR SWEEP?

Predicting the new leadership lineup ahead of a CCP party congress always has proven a daunting exercise. As discussed [elsewhere in this paper series](#), there are virtually no hard rules limiting the range of outcomes, and even the “norms” that are often cited as governing the process are, at best, loose conventions rather than predictable practices. Xi’s extreme centralization of power also means that China’s already opaque political system is even more so, and more than two and a half years of COVID isolation for China has made it much more challenging to glean authoritative insights. In fact, even with the party congress on the doorstep, one need only look at the dearth of reporting from major media outlets about possible outcomes and rumored machinations to understand the impacts of these phenomena on outsiders’ ability to peer behind the screen.

And yet, one still gets the very clear sense that the personnel arrangements for the 20th Party Congress largely are in hand, and that Xi Jinping is firmly in command and therefore presumably comfortable with them. Xi’s willingness to travel to Central Asia in mid-September to attend a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—his first trip outside China since COVID shut down the country—was a strong indicator that he judges the preparations for the congress to be basically complete, even in the face of [unfounded rumors](#) that he stayed home for so long because he feared a coup, and the [ridiculously outlandish claims](#) that his enemies took advantage of his absence to depose him. In fact, before Xi even departed China, several top state media outlets con-

comitantly launched [a new series titled “Navigating China”](#) (领航中国 *linghang zhongguo*) extolling the progress and policy successes achieved since Xi became China’s top leader. That same month, the editor-in-chief of state news agency Xinhua, [Fu Hua, wrote](#) that his publication would “never stand outside the party line for one minute, never deviate from the direction pointed by General Secretary Xi Jinping for one minute, and never disappear from the sight of General Secretary Xi Jinping and the party central committee for one minute”—a level of sycophancy unlikely to be directed toward a leader who was nervous about his position.

The timing of the party congress underscores Xi’s personal confidence and satisfaction with the arrangements. Given the normal mechanics of staging a party congress, the conclave is being held about as early in the cycle as possible. The dates for the congress were only [announced by the Politburo](#) at its monthly meeting in late August, and the requirement to hold the final, Seventh Plenum of the 19th Central Committee ahead of the meeting would have made an earlier date very challenging. Indeed, given the wide array of [confident commentary](#) before the Politburo meeting suggesting that the congress would take place in November at the earliest, its convocation in mid-October seems a clear sign that the proceedings are under control and that Xi is expecting a very positive outcome.

If we accept that Xi is content with the party congress preparations, it is possible to deduce the most likely scenarios for the personnel turnover at the apex of the CCP system. As with so many things in Xi Jinping’s unique political universe, it seems likely that the outcome will be one of two fairly binary, and perhaps nearly equally likely, possibilities. The PBSC could witness very little change

It is fair to say that the current PBSC members have demonstrated little ability, and perhaps even desire, to push for policy approaches other than Xi's preferred course.

if Xi decides either to strictly adhere to the “seven up, eight down” (七上八下 *qishang baxia*) principle followed since the 16th Party Congress in 2002 — whereby leaders who are 68 at the time of the next congress should step down, while those 67 and younger may be added to or remain on the Politburo — or to largely abide by it except for some PBSC incumbents, most probably Premier Li Keqiang. Alternatively, Xi could adjust the age criteria downward or ignore the age convention altogether, creating a lot more room for new entrants to the PBSC.

**The Case for Stasis.** Xi may rank a major revamp to the PBSC fairly low in his hierarchy of priorities for the congress. As noted earlier, if his status within the CCP pantheon is elevated to be on a par with that of Mao, Xi can expect to gain a position of authority over his Politburo peers roughly equal to that enjoyed by modern China's longest-ruling paramount leader. Even without that boost, however, it is fair to say that the current PBSC members have demonstrated little ability, and perhaps even desire, to push for policy approaches other than Xi's preferred course. Despite all the hullabaloo in the spring of 2022 about Li Keqiang seeking to mitigate or reverse Xi initiatives such as the zero-COVID policy and the crackdowns on the technology and property sectors, those approaches remain largely unchanged. Xi may also have other incentives to keep the PBSC lineup mostly intact:

- Modest turnover on the PBSC still leaves Xi the chance to reward his closest followers—such as CCP General Office Director Ding Xuexiang, Shanghai CCP Secretary Li Qiang, or others—with promotions from the full Politburo. Likewise, the departure of the last vestige of former President Jiang Zemin's patronage network, Executive Vice Premier Han Zheng,

gives Xi an opportunity to bolster his majority on the PBSC with a net gain of at least one seat. Li Keqiang's retirement would make that outcome even more probable.

- A critical piece of Xi's leadership alchemy has been keeping his colleagues off balance as to his exact intentions, whether through the occasional deliberate strategic political withdrawal in the vein of Mao or through his surprise dumping of the presidential term limit very early in his current stint as party boss. A relatively static PBSC would let Xi postpone the succession question through at least 2027, barring any major changes to the Politburo lineup during the five-year tenure of the 20th Central Committee and contributing to Xi's reputation for inscrutability in a way that would facilitate his constant drive to enhance his political mystique.
- Xi is well aware of the belief among domestic and foreign businesses, other market participants, and perhaps even major foreign governments that a factionally balanced leadership is a bullish sign for more pragmatic policy solutions. Although the conventional wisdom that foreign perceptions factor very little into CCP grandees' thinking on internal matters is generally accurate, China's growing presence on the world stage—and the international community's response to it—is something the Politburo cannot afford to ignore. Consequently, the bounce in market confidence that would accompany the stasis scenario could provide a shot in the arm to China's woefully anemic economy and a welcome injection of what CCP

it may be the case that Xi's non-personnel-related objectives for the congress are already so far advanced that they require very little expenditure of political capital to achieve.

propagandists call “positive energy” as an antidote to the “[China is uninvestible](#)” headline that has dominated foreign media for much of the last year.

**The Case for a Sweep.** Given the recent explosion of hagiographic praise for Xi's leadership and the many accomplishments the CCP has made “since the 18th Party Congress” (i.e., since Xi ascended to top leader), it may be the case that Xi's non-personnel-related objectives for the congress are already so far advanced that they require very little expenditure of political capital to achieve:

- In the theoretical and ideological realm, for example, just since June, the CCP propaganda machine has published a tidal wave of books outlining Xi's unique “Thought” on subjects including the economy, diplomacy, military affairs, and society and culture.
- In the wake of the ill-fated “Twitter coup” in late September, the CCP announced that it was also publishing a five-volume “[Revitalization Library](#)” (复兴文库 *fuxing wenku*) studying the history of China's pursuit of “national rejuvenation” from 1840, with a particular focus on “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴 *zhonghua minzhu weida fuxing*), Xi's signature catch-all policy framework for the changes he has wrought since taking power. The Library's first three volumes were to be published immediately, indicating that the project had been in the works for some time ahead of the party congress.
- In describing the Library's significance, [a former CCP propagandist noted](#) that it was unprecedented to publish such

a major compilation on the party's long-range goal ahead of a congress, and that it was exceptionally rare to do so on a single policy goal rather than the typical publication of a top leader's “selected works” after they had left formal office.

Against this backdrop, Xi may have concluded that he has a virtually free hand to stack the PBSC with his loyalists. He could achieve this goal in a number of ways, the most obvious being to adjust the “seven up, eight down” principle or to abandon it entirely. By lowering the age restriction by just one year, for example, he could give himself three additional PBSC seats—those currently occupied by Li Keqiang, Wang Huning, and Wang Yang — to fill with his associates. Doing away with the convention entirely would give him even more freedom of action, allowing him to retire any of his current PBSC colleagues.

One possibility under that scenario could include Zhao Leji, secretary of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). Often viewed as a Xi loyalist, given his responsibilities in managing Xi's unrelenting antigraft campaign and their shared home province of Shaanxi, Zhao does not have long-standing ties to the president, suggesting that he could be a one-term PBSC member. By way of a rough historical analogy to describe Xi's calculations regarding Zhao, Jiang Zemin accepted Wu Guanzheng as CCDI secretary at the 16th Party Congress but regretted doing so when Wu helped then president Hu Jintao purge Jiang ally Chen Liangyu from his post as Shanghai party boss in 2006. Feeling double-crossed, Jiang ensured that an absolute loyalist, He Guoqiang, took charge of the CCDI at the 17th Party Congress in 2007. Of course, Xi does not have to retire Zhao in order to place

**Xi will focus on maintaining and deepening his grip on the key levers of power within the CCP's control ecosystem while simultaneously expanding his substantial majority on the Politburo and his sway within the CCP machinery.**

his own man atop the CCDI, but Zhao would then need another perch that also could go to a direct Xi protégé.

Along those same lines, Xi may have incentives to clean house in the PBSC to keep his lieutenants motivated and loyal. Although many observers [originally thought](#) that Xi had a shallow political network when he first rose to power, his stable of supporters from his ancestral home of Shaanxi and from his time in Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces and later in Shanghai has turned out to be fairly robust. Under a stasis scenario, many of these supporters — such as CCP Propaganda Department Director Huang Kunming, Guangdong Provincial CCP Secretary Li Xi, or Beijing Municipal CCP Secretary Cai Qi — could miss their last chance to reach the apex of party power. Moving a number of his allies to the PBSC also would clear their seats on the full Politburo to be occupied by other Xi allies. That, in turn, could help Xi allay concerns among up-and-coming officials in his camp that their future prospects are too uncertain given the lack of any sign of a clear succession road map.

Finally, the sweep scenario seems consistent with Xi's self-image as a bold and transformational figure as opposed to a calculating plodder. Xi's harsh critique of the administrations of his two immediate predecessors, Jiang and Hu, seems to center on the notion that their adherence to a system of fairly routinized, stepwise promotion spawned an overly cautious model of governance in which, as [the party history resolution](#) passed at the Sixth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee in November 2021 put it fairly starkly, "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." It came as no sur-

prise, then, that the party [in late September issued revisions](#) to its code laying out the circumstances under which officials can be sidelined from important positions. The revisions, an update to the code issued in 2015, noted that cadres should be demoted if they have "shaky ideals and beliefs [or] soft stances and vague attitudes on major issues involving the party's leadership"; have "a weak sense of responsibility and fighting spirit"; or mishandle or seek to avoid "urgent and major missions." In particular, the top four criteria for demotion or dismissal under the new rules relate to showing insufficient loyalty to Xi's personal leadership.

#### **THE FULL POLITBURO AND OTHER SENIOR CCP BODIES: CONSOLIDATING GAINS**

Turning to the reshuffle in the full Politburo and other leading CCP organs, Xi will focus on maintaining and deepening his grip on the key levers of power within the CCP's control ecosystem while simultaneously expanding his substantial majority on the Politburo and his sway within the CCP machinery. On the former, the primary loci of his attention will be the Chinese military; the People's Liberation Army (PLA); the propaganda apparatus; the central CCP bureaucracy; and the security, legal, and intelligence agencies. Bringing these institutions firmly under Xi's control has arguably taken on even more significance in light of his ever-expanding definition of national security under the umbrella of his concept of "comprehensive national security" (总体国家安全 *zongti guojia anquan*). As Mercator Institute for China Studies scholars Katja Drinhausen and Helena Legarda put it succinctly in [their September 2022 study](#) of Xi's preoccupation with comprehensive national security, "Xi has turned national security from [a] policy



**Xi has effectively managed to “depoliticize” the PLA in the sense of the existence of contending political interest groups of officers loyal to a particular member of the high command or to an individual senior civilian leader other than Xi.**

goal into [a] mode of governance,” and these organizations are the pointy end of the spear in that governance approach.

Unsurprisingly, then, Xi has made it something of a passion project during the first decade of his rule to transform these organizations from the powerful, fairly autonomous fiefdoms they constituted during the Jiang and Hu periods into instruments wielded exclusively by Xi in an unflinchingly hierarchical world of CCP power and control. Xi’s success in this regard is perhaps most notable in the PLA, where there is no evidence of individual or groups of uniformed officers who are not firmly aligned with Xi’s personal control of and policies for the armed wing of the CCP. The details of Xi’s efforts to bring the high command to heel have been addressed [elsewhere in this paper series](#), but in short, through a combination of a relentless anticorruption campaign and an unprecedented retooling of the PLA’s command structure, Xi has effectively managed to “depoliticize” the PLA in the sense of the existence of contending political interest groups of officers loyal to a particular member of the high command or to an individual senior civilian leader other than Xi:

- That said, Xi’s road to dominating the PLA has not been without the occasional hiccup. His last-minute purge of two top generals — Fang Fenghui, chief of the Central Military Commission (CMC) Joint Staff Department, and Zhang Yang, director of the CMC Political Work Department — just ahead of the 19th Party Congress in 2017 suggested that Xi saw something he did not like that prompted their hasty ouster.
- Ahead of the 20th Party Congress, however, Xi’s control over the PLA

seems very much in hand. All the senior officers who are likely to take up key positions in the high command have been promoted to flag rank by Xi, and the staggering turnover (85 percent) in [PLA representation](#) from the 18th to the 19th Central Committees suggests that Xi already has ripped out the remnant supporters of purged senior officers — such as former CMC Vice Chairmen Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou — root and branch.

In fact, the most likely candidates to serve as the two new ranking uniformed officers as vice chairmen of the CMC, who would be eligible to take up the traditional two seats on the Politburo reserved for representatives from the senior officer corps, all have some connection to Xi Jinping. For example, current CMC members Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin, who would be in line for a vice chairmanship overseeing the PLA’s vast political commissariat, appear to be Xi loyalists. Miao served in the former 31st Group Army in Fujian Province when Xi was the governor there, and Zhang was Xi’s choice to replace the last senior protégé of Guo and Xu, General Du Jincai, as head of the PLA’s anti-graft watchdog, strongly suggesting that he has Xi’s trust.

- On the operational side of the PLA, Eastern Theater Command Commander General Lin Xiangyang seems to be a solid candidate for a CMC vice chairmanship. Like Miao Hua, he has strong career ties to Fujian, including serving as deputy commander of the 31st Group Army. Since 2016, he has been rapidly promoted and transferred through a series of group army and theater commands, certainly giving the impression of an officer on the fast track for higher office. Moreover,

**Xi's success over the last two years in preparing to bring the security ecosystem under his formal control at the party congress is a stunning achievement.**

his direction of the recent military exercises around Taiwan in the wake of U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's August visit to the island would be a feather in his cap going into the 20th Party Congress.

- As to the lineup for the rest of the CMC, one thing to watch will be whether the revamped CMC structure that emerged from the 19th Party Congress will remain the same this time around. The CMC's current configuration has something of a slapdash feel to it, which may have resulted, in part, from the hasty purge of Fang Fenghui and Zhang Yang just before the last congress. Therefore, Xi may choose to make further adjustments to the CMC membership to signal his absolute dominance of the PLA or to better integrate new learnings from the PLA's adoption of its new command structure over the last several years.

Xi's track record in bringing the security, legal, and intelligence agencies to heel has been much spottier than his campaign with the PLA. For example, it is important to remember that at the very start of Xi's stint as China's top leader, almost all the leading posts within the security and legal apparatus were controlled by officials associated with the network of former Chinese President Jiang Zemin and his longtime lieutenant and former Vice President Zeng Qinghong: the CCP Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (CPLAC), which provides party oversight of these agencies, was led by Jiang crony Meng Jianzhu; the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) by Zeng associate Guo Shengkun; the Ministry of State Security (MSS) by the Jiang-friendly Geng Huichang; and the top

prosecutor's office by Jiang loyalist Cao Jianming. Moreover, Xi faced equally daunting challenges down the ranks within the MPS and MSS, where most of the key vice ministers were not his acolytes. Even at the start of Xi's current term, most of these positions still were in the hands of officials who could not be described as loyal Xi lieutenants.

Consequently, Xi's success over the last two years in preparing to bring the security ecosystem under his formal control at the party congress is a stunning achievement. Similar to Xi's efforts in the PLA, the war against graft within the security bureaucracy has been a fundamental enabler of his success. He wielded the anticorruption scythe to topple many of the MSS and MPS vice ministers and local police chiefs whose loyalty was questionable along the way and, in late September, capped off the effort when the courts handed down dramatic death sentences for both former Justice Minister Fu Zhenghua and former Vice Minister of Public Security Sun Lijun. Xi's allies also have taken up important positions in the key agencies that signal his unambiguous control going forward:

- After an almost uncomfortably long period as MPS party secretary and minister-in-waiting, Xi protégé Wang Xiaohong was formally made China's top cop in late June and has moved quickly to salt the central and local ranks of the MPS with his former associates.
- Xi enforcer Chen Yixin directed the two-year rectification campaign in the sector that purged the likes of Sun and Fu, and he appears to have day-to-day control of the CPLAC despite formally serving as just its secretary-general. Chen has also been a prominent "pen"

**In the propaganda system and the other top CCP bodies that direct the CCP machinery, Xi is likely to run the table and, where required, to replace more neutral officials with his own men.**

extolling Xi's virtues in a wide variety of state media and frequently on subjects only tangentially related to his immediate remit.

- In early September, another Xi ally, Ying Yong, was confirmed in a new position as China's number-two prosecutor. Ying's appointment came as something of a surprise given his move just a few months before to what traditionally has been a sinecure post in China's national legislature. Ying is likely to be promoted to procurator-general in the spring, succeeding Zhang Jun. Zhang may, in turn, become China's top judge. Although he does not have direct patronage ties to Xi, Zhang's track record in a series of legal and judicial appointments confirms that he is much more in line with Xi's emphasis on subordinating the courts to CCP control than current top jurist Zhou Qiang.
- With his allies now in position, Xi is virtually certain to place a loyalist atop the CPLAC and in the Politburo seat that has generally accompanied that job. Chen Yixin probably has the inside track there, with Wang Xiaohong remaining at MPS and gaining a state councilorship in the spring of 2023. However, either man in the CPLAC chair would represent a net gain for Xi on the Politburo.

In the propaganda system and the other top CCP bodies that direct the CCP machinery, Xi is likely to run the table and, where required, to replace more neutral officials with his own men. On both the PBSC and the full Politburo, for example, Xi presumably will want to take more personal control of the portfolios overseeing ideology, party discipline, and the Politburo's executive agencies:

- At the PBSC level, this will require either retiring Wang Huning and Zhao Leji or shunting them off to less important portfolios there. Huang Kunming would be a natural successor to Wang for the ideology portfolio and as the chief secretary of the Secretariat, the CCP's executive arm, and Ding Xuexiang could succeed Zhao to direct the CCDI.
- In the full Politburo, Li Shulei, Huang's newly minted number two in the Propaganda Department, would step up to be its director. One of several Xi-loyalist candidates is sure to replace the retiring Chen Xi as personnel czar helming the CCP Organization Department, and another almost certainly would replace Ding as head of the CCP General Office if Ding is promoted to the PBSC. Yet another Xi acolyte, Xu Lingyi, is likely to succeed Yang Xiaodu as the ranking CCDI deputy and head of the National Supervisory Commission, retaining that Politburo seat for Xi's camp as well.

Xi's protégés will likely round out their Politburo romp by sweeping all the seats allocated to the party chiefs of the four provincial-level municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing, as well as the seat representing Guangdong Province. The only Politburo-level regional party boss without direct ties to Xi probably will be Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region CCP Secretary Ma Xingrui, though it is unlikely Xi would put Ma in such a sensitive post unless he were fully confident on his loyalty. Importantly, Jiang Zemin appears to have no strong candidates from his network to join the Politburo, and Hu Jintao seems to only have one option, with National People's Congress Standing Committee Vice Chair Shen Yueyue vying to succeed the only female member of the

Despite the persistence of media and observer commentary claiming that there is a remnant of Hu Jintao's old political network that can still be called a Communist Youth League (CYL) "faction," there is very little direct evidence that it exists today, or that it was ever terribly robust even when Hu was still in power.

current Politburo, Vice Premier and COVID czar Sun Chunlan, another Hu ally.

### THE COMMUNIST YOUTH LEAGUE "FACTION" IS EXTINCT . . .

Despite the persistence of [media](#) and [observer](#) commentary claiming that there is a remnant of Hu Jintao's old political network that can still be called a Communist Youth League (CYL) "faction," there is very little direct evidence that it exists today, or that it was ever terribly robust even when Hu was still in power. True, some senior officials in the party hierarchy have a CYL affiliation, but that is hardly surprising given the CYL's size and traditional function as a talent-spotter for the CCP. The problem comes when analysts assume that a rump CYL network was handed from Hu to Li Keqiang and that Li may soon hand the mantle to the faction's supposed next generation, Wang Yang and Hu Chunhua. Indeed, neither Wang nor Hu appears to have traditional patron-client ties to Li Keqiang, and there is no persuasive evidence of them working in concert to pursue a particular policy agenda (other than that dictated by Xi).

Moreover, Xi appears to have a dim view of the CYL, and he seems to have been waging a fairly concerted campaign—starting more than six years ago—to break whatever power the organization may have had. Xi's concerns about the CYL and its alumni probably ran deep and were sown in part by the antics of one of the leading officials then associated with the group, former CCP General Office Director Ling Jihua, in the tumultuous circumstances that immediately preceded Xi's rise to power. Ling was among a group of several influential leaders whom Xi subsequently purged on corruption charges but whose crimes official media accounts later hinted may have included plotting to constrain Xi as China's new top leader or perhaps

even to disrupt his accession entirely.

Whatever those early leanings, by 2016, Xi appeared to launch a direct assault on the CYL and the fortunes of senior officials linked to it. In August that year, the Central Committee issued a "[Reform Plan for the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League](#)," which, among other things, called for a substantial overhaul that would shrink the CYL's central leadership, put it more directly under party supervision, and return it to its grass roots to win over the country's young people. Its [budget for that year](#) was also cut by nearly 50 percent from the previous year. As a former editor of the CYL's newspaper put it bluntly [in an interview](#) with the *New York Times*, "The criticisms of the Youth League show that its influence has run its course . . . it's become a political zombie."

- And yet, 2017 seemed to bring even greater humiliations for the CYL. [An official book](#) released in September of that year publicizing some of Xi's previously internal remarks about the CYL had him lambasting the organization for "chanting empty slogans" and chiding its officials for their "bureaucratic and arrogant air." That same month, the outgoing chief of the CYL, Qin Yizhi, was embarrassingly demoted when he was transferred to his next post.
- At the 19th Party Congress in November 2017, two of the three sitting Politburo members who did not join the new Politburo, despite being notionally young enough to do so—former Vice President Li Yuanchao and former Propaganda Department Director Liu Qibao—both had CYL backgrounds.
- Xi seemed to twist the knife for a final time in [his speech in May](#) 2022



The CYL's demise as a politically meaningful organization within the CCP system further gives the lie to the fallacy that its remaining alumni within the Politburo, Wang Yang and Hu Chunhua, somehow will save China from the perceived scourge of Xi Jinping's economic policies.

marking the CYL's centennial. He used the speech as a vehicle, once again, [for framing CCP history](#) in such a way as to undergird his continued rule, and neatly connected the organization's future to his "New Era" and "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

- As if to drive the final stake into the heart of the organization's politically meaningful future, the last of the generally recognized fast-risers from the CYL's heyday, Lu Hao, was effectively demoted in June with his transfer from a ministerial position to head the State Council Development Research Center, the cabinet's official think tank.

### ... UNDERSCORING THE MYTH OF CHINA'S "SAVIOR PREMIER"

The CYL's demise as a politically meaningful organization within the CCP system further gives the lie to the fallacy that its remaining alumni within the Politburo, Wang Yang and Hu Chunhua, somehow will save China from the perceived scourge of Xi Jinping's economic policies. For starters, there is no reason to believe that either man, if he were to succeed Li Keqiang as premier, would be any more successful at changing Xi's mind about his preferred economic approach than Li has been. Even seemingly trivial new practices that Xi has adopted, such as the requirement that all Politburo members, including Xi's PBSC colleagues, must submit year-end reports to Xi on their performance for his approval, probably serve to inhibit such instincts. A case can be made, of course, that Wang and Hu lack Li's baggage as a onetime putative rival to Xi for top leader, but that status may also have given Li about as much clout as a premier under Xi could have, and Wang or Hu may well be dealing

with a further aggrandized Xi if he achieves the ideological and other crowning he is seeking at the party congress.

Moreover, given the strong prospective down-ballot win for Xi outlined earlier, Wang and Hu presumably will be very isolated within the new Politburo, especially if Li Keqiang does formally retire. At 59, Hu's relative youth is [sometimes seen as bolstering his political clout](#) because it suggests he might somehow outlive Xi politically. But, as the collapse of former Politburo member Bo Xilai in 2012 and Xi's surprise 2017 dethroning of former Politburo member Sun Zhengcai underscore, such confidence can be very dangerous when living in Xi's political ecosystem. Indeed, the fact that Sun was once viewed as Hu's putative wingman atop China's sixth-generation leadership probably ensures that Hu's influence always will be limited. An analogue for the situation Hu confronts under those circumstances would be the forever circumscribed position of former Premier Wen Jiabao after appearing in Tiananmen Square alongside later purged CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang on the eve of the military crackdown in 1989.

Finally, although Wang and Hu do seem to have had generally more market-oriented instincts in the past, they are not the same men they were when they were running Guangdong Province earlier in their careers. Both have been serving in the more stilted ecosystem of Beijing for at least five years, where they have been getting daily exposure to Xi's ultra-tight political environment. At the same time, and as suggested earlier, Hu may narrowly have avoided going down with Sun ahead of the last party congress, as his almost theatrical support for Xi's policies and over-the-top praise for Xi's personal stewardship of the CCP since that time might imply.

**Analysts in both markets and governments may need to review the assumptions and analytic models they apply when trying to understand leadership politics and priorities in Xi Jinping's China.**

Hu and Wang may see more eye to eye with Xi on some aspects of economic policy than the caricatures of them might suggest. As the official in charge of their frontline implementation, Hu in his current vice premier role appears to have genuinely embraced Xi's emphasis on poverty alleviation and program of rural revitalization. Similarly, Wang was publicly fighting with Bo Xilai before it was popular, and perhaps even safe, to do so, something that Xi probably credited to Wang's account. In fact, the focus of Wang's argument with Bo at the time—the [“cake debate”](#) over whether to emphasize growing the economy's base or dividing its fruits more equitably across society—has resurfaced with the same words and ferocity around the forward trajectory of Xi's “Common Prosperity” program. Judging from the rapid deployment of officials from Vice Premier Liu He's office to calm fears about the rollout of “Common Prosperity” by emphasizing the importance of “growing the cake,” it seems Xi may agree with Wang's view that this should be the priority, at least until the economy returns to a more stable footing.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The foregoing assessment suggests that analysts in both markets and governments may need to review the assumptions and analytic models they apply when trying to understand leadership politics and priorities in Xi Jinping's China. The implication that the PBSC, nominally the apex of party power and decision-making, may matter less than it has under previous Chinese leaders has potentially profound consequences. The same can be said for the race for the premiership, where it seems that whoever succeeds Li Keqiang—including a Xi ally—is unlikely to wield the same power in shaping the country's economic trajectory and outcomes that earlier premiers like Zhu Rongji or even

the comparatively weaker Wen Jiabao did. As Li Keqiang's tenure has clearly demonstrated, the premier in Xi Jinping's political ecosystem is to be an implementer of economic policy rather than the architect of it. So whether it is the zero-COVID policy, regulatory crackdowns in various sectors, or China's openness to trade with and investment from the outside world, Xi alone will be making the critical decisions. Although turning many long-standing assumptions about how the CCP regime operates on their heads, these new realities are consistent with the broad pattern in Xi's political revamp of replacing formal structures with informal ones and once solid lines of political authority with dotted ones.

The analysis also reminds us that for decades, the world has not dealt with a CCP leader with the type of authority Mao had, in both its positive (the breakthrough reestablishing relations with the West) and negative (the disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution) aspects, and certainly not one leading a country that is now much more powerful and consequential than it was during Mao's time. The prospect for markets to be whipsawed depending on the outcome of the leadership sweepstakes underscores this reality. Exploring the contours of what this might mean for policy trajectories after the party congress may feel incongruous right now, especially with the stifling policy inertia that seems to have gripped the Chinese system during the run-up to the party congress and amid a deep sense of economic and geopolitical uncertainty. Nevertheless, undertaking this exercise probably will be worth the trouble if it helps observers better predict both positive (a potentially speedier exit from the zero-COVID policy) and negative (tensions with Taiwan boiling over) surprises.