



The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and the Possible Outcomes



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The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (19th Congress) will assemble in Beijing commencing from October 18, 2017 and may go on for about a week. The Congress will be closely watched for alters likely to be considered for incorporation in the Constitution, leadership changes and deviations to certain established practices which will indicate the power balance within the party organs and the might of the current political dispensation in China.

Delegates

The 19th Congress will have 2300 delegates elected by 40 electoral units, 30 more than the 18th Congress, representing 88 million members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and 4.4 million Party organisations. The additional delegates will represent members from 'Front Line' grass-root occupations such as workers, farmers and specialists of various trades. Even amongst the others, compared to the 18th Congress, one third of the delegates

are expected to represent the 'Front Line' workers, the increase being 1.33, 13.3 and 1.33 percentage points in respect of delegates representing provincial level regions, the central financial sectors and Beijing based centrally administered enterprises respectively.¹ The 40 electoral units include 34 provincial units including China's Provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities, the CPC work committees in Hong Kong and Macao and the All-China Federation of Taiwan Compatriots. The other six electoral units encompass Central Government agencies, Departments directly under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC CC), Centrally administered State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), Financial Sector, People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Armed Police Forces (PAPF). Of the 2300 delegates, 1909 delegates had been announced earlier. Last to announce, on September 06, 2017, PLA and PAPF declared 253 and 50 delegates respectively for the Congress. Of the 303 delegates from PLA and PAPF, ninety percent are said to be first timers.

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The Party Congress nominates the members of the Central Committee which in theory elects the General Secretary and members of the Politburo, the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) and the Central Military Commission (CMC) besides endorsing the composition of the Secretariat and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). However, in practice, appointments are guided by a top-down process.

CMC members included in the list of delegates are: Wei Fenghe (Commander, PLA Rocket Force), Chang Wanquan (Minister for National Defence), Wu Shengli (PLA Navy Chief), Ma Xiaotian (PLA Air Force Chief), Fan Changlong (Vice Chairman of the CMC), Zhao Keshi (Director Logistic Support Department) (*Global Times quoting PLA Daily reported on September 13, 2017 that General Song Puxuan, Commander of the PLA Northern Theatre Command has been appointed the new Head of the CMC Logistical Support Department*) and Xu Qiliang (Air Force General and Vice Chairman of CMC). Retired Admiral Wu Shengli (PLA Navy Chief till January 01, 2017) is also among the delegates. The names of General Fang Fenghui (Director, CMC Joint Staff Department) and Zhang Yang (Director, CMC Political Work Department till September 2017, present status not known), have been omitted and are rumoured to be under investigation on charges of corruption.²

Candidates seeking to be nominated as Party delegates for the Congress go through a five stage selection process, a process which is one of scrutiny and nomination than of free open elections. The initial nominations are made by grass roots party branches. Party Committee, at each level, will then screen these nominations by obtaining the appraisal of the grass roots party branches and by holding Party Committee meetings to discuss the suitability of the candidates. The chosen candidates then move to the second stage where the contenders are screened by the concerned electoral units by obtaining the assessment of the grassroots party organisation to which the candidate belongs and the Party and non-party members who know the candidate. The candidate is assessed for his political soundness,

discipline, moral integrity and loyalty to the Party. At the third stage, the electoral unit of the candidates will decide on a primary list of candidates based on the composition and qualitative requirements laid down by the CPC CC. Screening by concerned departments including Discipline Inspection Bureau will also be carried out.

At this stage as per the election rules, the number of candidates should be at least fifteen percent more than the number of delegates to be elected. By this time all potential inconvenient delegates are eliminated. The initial list is then opened to public scrutiny. At the fourth stage, the electoral unit in a committee meeting vote to decide on a formal list of candidates. At the final stage a Party Congress is held within the electoral unit which elects the delegates.

Beidaihe Retreat

As per convention, prior to the Congress, Chinese leaders including the old guard, the elder party leaders, get together at Beidaihe, a resort town close to Bohai Sea off China's East coast to discuss and decide on important policy issues, key political appointments and changes to China's constitution. During these gatherings the Communist Party factions and dominant elders go all out to demand, bargain and wrestle to secure consensus, to position as many of their adherents as members of the all-powerful PSC as possible during the Congress.

This year, days before the scheduled Beidaihe meeting, over 300 leaders from all over the country including the seven members of the PSC, key members from the provincial levels of the government, top leaders from central government and its agencies, the military, the People's Congress, and the judiciary were summoned to Beijing for an unscheduled gathering from July 26 to July 27 at the military run Xingxi Hotel.

The assembly coming barely two days after the arrest and purge of Sun Zhengcai, one of the youngest members of the elite Politburo and a prominent Chongqing official who was tipped to succeed Xi Jinping is significant.

Chen Miner a Xi protégé succeeded him in July 2017 as party chief of Chongqing. According to Ming Chucheng,³ the head of National Taiwan University's Political Science department, last time a secret party meeting under similar circumstances was held soon after Lin Biao, China's top military commander and a designated successor to Mao Zedong, died in a plane crash when fleeing to the Soviet Union. This time, the aim might have been to give an overview of the recent anti-corruption drive, arrests and consequent political changes that have been effected and contemplated so as to bring together the Party members and the officials around Xi Jinping and his policies before the Congress.

During this year's Beidaihe meeting, Li Zhanshu, the head of the General Office of CPC, a Politburo member and a key ally of Xi, was expected to make a detailed presentation suggesting certain changes to Party statutes to be taken up during the Congress and propose amendments to the Constitution to be enacted at the National People's Congress scheduled next spring.

Contexts that will impel the outcome of the Congress

Since coming to power, Xi has not been able to exercise comprehensive political control over the Government machinery and the PLA owing to the culture of corruption and wrongdoings nurtured and established by officials loyal to Jiang Zemin and his protégés over a decade. A few examples provide an insight into his debilitated position.

Officials of the Jiangsu Province in China's East coast, a strong hold of Jiang's faction headed by Jiang Zemin, have been disregarding Beijing's directions on anti-corruption measures issued under the directions of Xi. Three of Central Organisation Department's official instructions forbidding party cadres from taking up paid jobs in organisations for three years after retirement that they oversaw during their service were never promulgated in the Province. Consequently, a retired Party Secretary from Jiangsu Education Department of the Sanjiang University was reemployed at the University, a private higher education institution, a year

after his retirement drawing highest pay in the school ignoring the Central directives.⁴

In May 2016, five Beijing police officers wrongly arrested and beat to death Lei Yang, an environmentalist from a middle-class background. Shortly after Lei's death, President Xi Jinping convened a 'leading small group'⁵ meeting which announced plans for stricter police supervision and the need to solve existing law enforcement problems, a reference which state media linked to Lei Yang's death. Even though Xi openly called for a transparent administration of justice for Lei, in December 2016, the Beijing procuratorate, the highest agency at the national level responsible for both prosecution and investigation in the People's Republic of China declined to press criminal charges despite finding that the police officers involved used excessive force and caused Lei's death.

The military too showed signs of being piloted by forces from outside the political establishment. The delay in response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake that killed nearly 70000 people is being attributed to Generals refusing to take orders from Hu and Wen Jiabao, the then Prime Minister.⁶ The Chumar standoff in eastern Ladakh during Xi's visit to India from September 17 to 19, 2014, which had held the promise of improving bilateral ties was yet another example of the resistance Xi faced from the military despite being the Chairman of the all-powerful CMC.⁷

The all-powerful Mao Zedong was unable to get through his editorials in major state run newspapers to kick off his 'Cultural Revolution' in 1966 and had to pull strings to get them published in 'Wenhui Bao', a semi-official Shanghai newspaper. The party's Paramount leader Deng Xiaoping was unable to promote his 'Southern Tour' with an agenda for economic reform in Shenzhen, as the then propaganda chief, Deng Liqun and the then head of People's Daily, Gao Di, were Deng's rivals.⁸

Xi Jinping appears to be in a similar predicament not being able to exercise full control over the publicity machinery. China's Central Propaganda Department controlled since 2002 by Liu Yunshan, a member



of the seven members PSC, is a loyalist of Jiang Zemin. In 2012, he was made the head of the Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideology that controls the Department. He is also the chairman of the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization, which includes a heavy propaganda and ideological component, and is the president of the Central Party School which trains cadres.

The transformation of the annual state television function into an all-out propaganda festival with songs penned in praise of “Xi Dada” or Uncle Xi is an instance of the propaganda being taken too far. Chen Pokong, the author of a number of books of Chinese political culture, is of the opinion that the propaganda machinery operated by Liu Yunshan is engaging in “praise assassination” or “pengsha” of Xi. “Praise someone to the heavens, so when a fall comes it will be disastrous”, Chen said, elaborating his view in a program on New Tang Dynasty Television (NTD), a New York-based Chinese language broadcaster that is part of the Epoch Media Group.⁹ According to Ming Pao, a Hong Kong Daily, Xi reacted by issuing an internal Party circular to the propaganda department, officials and semi-official mainland Chinese media banning the use of “Xi Dada” to refer to Xi.¹⁰

The media hype during the Doklam standoff could have also been possibly orchestrated under Liu Yunshan’s instructions to force Xi into acting against India at a crucial moment and to tarnish his image both internationally and within the country if he failed to act or succeed.

Process of fixing the State of Affairs and Consolidation of Power

The need to gain unquestionable power to be able to exercise authority over the Party, its organs, the Military and the Government had therefore become vital for Xi Jinping. Accordingly he spent the greater part of his first five years in office consolidating power to be in a position to exercise full control over the said establishments.

Assisted by Wang Qishan, Xi undertook a massive

anti-corruption drive to weed out the corrupt and elements of Jiang Zemin’s faction who were barricading his moves and had been infiltrated into various echelons of the Party and the Government. According to the Party’s anti-corruption agency, it is said that over a million Chinese officials including PLA officers have been purged. Path breaking military reforms had also been undertaken to dilute the power of the PLA Army and shape the force to meet the requirements of ‘integrated Joint Operations’ under ‘informationized conditions’, the PLA’s war doctrine. At senior levels, military leadership has been supplanted and swapped within the military to ensure loyalty and eliminate any possible nexus within and between the military and local civilian leadership. Xi’s close associates known for their fidelity have been positioned in key positions.

Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption drive has not been without its share of fallouts. Leaked Mossack Fonseca files have brought to light as to how Chinese leaders and their families have stashed off money offshore. Fear of investigations and losing ill-gotten wealth are said to be the major reasons for the outflow of capital. An analysis of the documents by the ‘International Consortium of Investigative Journalists’ has revealed that nearly one third of the firm’s business came from its offices in Hong Kong and China. About \$1 trillion is said to have been moved out of China depleting China’s foreign exchange reserves which could have adverse consequences on the country’s economy. Massive flow of money is said to be the reason for escalation of real estate prices worldwide. According to juwai.com, a real estate website that connects mainland Chinese clients with foreign sellers, Chinese buyers spent more than \$52 billion buying foreign properties in 2015. Despite China’s banking controls, around \$600 billion is said to have left China in 2015. Corruption is being attributed as the main reason for the local officials not strictly enforcing relevant economic policies.¹¹ Xi Jinping may be blamed for the negative consequences of his anti-corruption drive including slowing down of the economy and other social problems which may arise and escalate over a period of time in the future.

Visible Changes

When Xi took office as the General Secretary of the CPC, only four provincial chiefs and three governors were in his camp. After the last known changes in Party Secretaries and Governors that were effected in April 2017, the number of Xi's loyalists have gone up to sixteen provincial chiefs and eighteen governors. Provincial Party secretaries of the 31 provinces, provincial-level cities, and autonomous regions followed by the governors are the most authoritative powers within the Party in China. The remaining provincial leaders who are prominent members of Jiang's faction may possibly be sidelined before the 19th Congress, if not already done.

The anti-corruption campaign launched by Xi has made him very popular within the country. Xi has progressively shrunk the powers and authority of the country's military, political and security apparatus. The head of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission previously held by Zhou Yongkang is no longer a member of the PSC. At least nineteen of the serving and former bosses of the Commission have been investigated for corruption.¹²

An indication of Xi succeeding in his efforts to consolidate power, became apparent for the first time when on October 27, 2016, the communique of the sixth plenum of the 18th Congress labelled Xi Jinping as the "Core of the Party",¹³ a designation held by former Presidents and General Secretaries of the CPC except Hu Jintao suggesting that Xi will be the 'first amongst the equals' in the PSC.

Preparatory work prior to the 19th Congress

As a precursor to the 19th Congress, a Politburo meeting held on September 18, 2017,¹⁴ has set the agenda for the upcoming Congress. The meeting is said to have deliberated upon the proposed amendments to the Party constitution including major 'Theoretical viewpoints and major strategic thoughts'.¹⁵ a work report from the CCDI and a report on how the politburo has implemented the 'Eight Rules' put forward by President Xi Jinping in

2012. The draft amendments to the Constitution will be presented and further discussed at the seventh plenary session of the 18th Congress to be held on October 11, 2017, a week prior to the 19th Congress.¹⁶

Possible Outcomes of the 19th Congress and their Subtext

According to sources,¹⁷ it appears that this year, the closed door meeting of the elders and the serving principals did not take place at Beidaihe to discuss the anticipated leadership reshuffle or changes to the constitution that is to be approved at the party congress, suggesting Xi Jinping's enhanced grip over the party and consolidation of power ahead of his second term. It also signals that under Xi's rule the party elders are unlikely to have much say on matters affecting party affairs or governance. It is not known if the current leadership had private meetings with some of the party elders individually to seek their views or consensus.

Depending on the strength and standing that Xi gains by the time the 19th Congress kicks off, Xi Jinping may bring about far reaching reforms and changes within the Party and enact several significant transformations to the Constitution with a view to supplement and facilitate his efforts to consolidate power.

Ending Current Leadership Succession Norms

Going by the moves and symbolic pointers in China, it is possible Xi may attempt to end the current leadership succession norms in China. Till date Xi has not signaled anyone as his possible successor. Sun Zhengcai, a member of the Politburo who headed the municipality of Chongqing in Southwest China, considered a likely candidate to succeed Xi was suddenly removed from his post on July 15, 2017 and was investigated for corruption in late July 2017 putting an end to the speculation. Hu Chunhua, a Politburo member in the current set up with potentials to be nominated as the successor to the Chinese leadership is believed to have made an internal declaration¹⁸ that he has no ambitions for the top job.



Will the CPC's Chairman's post be restored?

The other discernable indications are significant, indicating a change in the leadership model. Soldiers of the Hong Kong¹⁹ PLA at the Shek Kong military base during a parade to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the former British colony's return to Chinese control on June 30, 2017, instead of welcoming the President Xi Jinping by shouting 'Hello Commander' as is usual, shouted 'Hello, Chairman', a welcome that has never been heard before during such an event. Similarly, the unusual absence of all party elders during a grand military parade to mark the 90th anniversary of the founding of the PLA held on July 30, 2017 at the Zhurihe training base in Inner Mongolia was noticeable. Xi was joined only by top military leaders. For the second time, troops on parade hailed Xi with 'Hello, Chairman' instead of being greeted as 'Hello, Commander'²⁰ as is customary. In China the presence or absence of leaders in such events are symbolic and signal their relevance or otherwise.

Mao had held the post of Chairman of the Communist Party from 1945 till his death in 1976. The position conferred on Mao, bestowed on him exceptional authority and powers over the military, besides allowing him to exercise control over the CMC. The post was abolished in 1982 as the powers amassed by Mao had allowed the country to slip into chaos, culminating in the 'Cultural Revolution'. Now with a view to further strengthen and consolidate power conferred on him by the 'Core of the Party' status, Xi may shed 'rule by collective leadership' and move towards the 'Chairmanship' model. Under this model, the Chairman will preside over the PSC besides being able to appropriate adequate powers to have the final say in all matters discussed in the PSC.

The plan to reestablish the post of Chairman may also be aimed at extending Xi's rule beyond the Party Congress in 2022 when his second term expires, as the post of Party Chairman is different from that of General Secretary and it doesn't carry any term, tenure or age restrictions assigned to it.

PSC may be abolished

In 2012, at the 18th Congress, the number of PSC members were brought down from 9 to 7 in order to simplify the decision making process and to limit the powers given to certain departments. Usually the PSC has between 5 and 9 members. With a PSC member heading a department, the concerned branch gains power and raises in the ranking. The membership of the PSC is strictly ranked in protocol sequence based on their presumed political power. The unmanageable power gained by the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission controlled by the ousted security czar Zhou Yongkang and China's Central Propaganda Department headed by Liu Yunshan has been a constant source of exasperation to Xi during his first five years of tenure as the President. It now appears that Xi may decide to scrap the PSC, and preside over an enhanced Politburo populated with a majority of his protégés under the pretext of doing away with elites within elites. With more numbers of Politburo members, various departments could be distributed among them for control and management. The change besides diluting the power of Politburo members will also slash the authority and muscle of officials and various departments now considered all powerful and place them all in an equal footing.

Will Li Keqiang, the present Prime Minister be replaced?

The political differences between President Xi Jinping who wants to make changes to the present debt fueled economy and the Prime Minister, Li Keqiang who controls the country's economy has been growing over the years. An anonymous interview which appeared in People's Daily in May 2016 exposes a deep rift bordering on near power struggle between Xi and Premier Li Keqiang and other top officials entrusted with the economy.²¹ Voices of dissatisfactions over the performance of China's economy have been growing over the years. China's 2015 stock market crash is also being attributed to Li.

Li Keqiang belongs to Communist Youth League. Qin Yizhi, the group's leader and an incumbent member of the present Central Committee has not received the invitation for the 19th Congress. Along with him four other members of the League have also not been invited. The reduced number of members from the League in the Central Committee shrinks the strength of present Prime Minister within the Party.

It is therefore possible that Premier Li may be moved either as the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress or as the Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Future of Wang Qishan

Wang Qishan, 69, who at present heads the CCDI, is ineligible to become the PSC member at the 19th Congress due to his age. He is considered a close ally of Xi Jinping and is the architect of the current anti-corruption campaign sweeping China. Should the Congress decide to retain the PSC system, he could replace Li Keqiang as the country's Prime Minister, a position that doesn't carry age restraints.

It has been reported that an anti-corruption office is being set up in the Ministry of Public Security, the state agency that oversees police and security forces in the Chinese regime probably as an option to accommodate Wang Qishan. This office is expected to be in operation by the time China's twin annual parliamentary meetings takes place in March 2018. This office is different from the Public Security Bureau administered by the Ministry of Public Security which co-ordinates the work of provincial public security bureaus that are also answerable to the local governments and branches of the CPC. This anti-corruption group was established in January 2016 and is headed by Xi loyalist Deng Weiping.

Will the 'Seven up, Eight down rule be dumped?'

PSC member, who is 68 or older at the time of a party congress, is expected to retire as per the existing norms. If however he is 67 or younger, he may still enter the

committee. Since 1990s, PSC members have followed this rule without an exception. Considering that, Wang Qishan, the present head of the CCDI who has spearheaded Xi's anti-corruption campaign has been his powerful aide and will continue to support him. In all likelihood this rule may be discarded at the Congress to accommodate him. Of late, Wang Qishan has been embroiled in corruption rumors and speculation has been rife that he has been suffering from liver cancer. There has also been speculation that the Beidaihe meeting concluded last month stating that Wang was retiring.²²

To add to the mystery, for about a month, Wang has not been seen in public, fueling speculation of sorts. He finally made an officially reported public appearance in Hunan province, calling for the tightening of Communist Party discipline at grassroot party organisations. The last time Wang's name was mentioned and that too in passing in state media was on August 6, 2017 when Xinhua ran a report to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Inner Mongolia autonomous region.²³

Central Military Commission (CMC)

If the present trend of diluting the authority and powers of officials and organizations is anything to go by, the CMC may have four Vice Presidents instead of the present two after the Congress. With this, the restructuring of the higher defence management set up in China will be complete.

Conclusion

In all probability the outcome of the 19th Congress will pave the way for Chinese President Xi Jinping to gain complete control over the Party, the government and the military. However, it is only time that will uncover as to how he may utilise his new found authority and power. Hopefully, he will not only improve and stabilise China's economy and perk up the living conditions of the rural masses internally but will also work towards peace and stability in the region and the world. If Xi's concerns

in the Lei Yang's case are anything to go by, the world expects him to transform the country's attitude towards human rights violations, including that in Tibet, respect rule of law both within and beyond China's borders and be conscious of the territorial and sovereignty issues of countries.

As for India, in-depth studies and research shows that the Chinese President Xi Jinping may not have been a party to either the Doklam or the Chumar Standoffs. In all probability these conundrums may be the handiwork of forces inimical to Xi. Based on the outcome of the Congress, India may do well to pause, make an assessment of the changes and take up issues of concerns to India at an appropriate time at the political level initially and thereafter progress them diplomatically.

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