

The Complete Guide to China's Leadership Re-shuffle

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This article was received before the official announcement of the new leadership. - DL

In a highly choreographed ritual, seven suited men will this Wednesday stride onto a stage in Beijing, hair dyed jet black, led, naturally, by Chinese President Xi Jinping. What to the casual observer appears to be a rigid, inconsequential ceremony is in fact the unveiling of the most powerful political body on earth.

The Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) may be somewhat trivial-sounding, but is actually the very pinnacle of political power in China. It acts as an immensely powerful decision making body, and the new membership will take their seats on it as China approaches a crucial stage in its development. But the revealing of the new PBSC in front of the world press is far from the be all and end all of the 19th Party Congress. There are a host of other important bodies which will also be stacked with new members, including the wider Politburo, the Central Military Commission and the Central Committee, all of which perform significant governmental functions.

In spite of this, analysts, and particularly journalists, all too often espouse the view that elite Chinese politics is a black box that produces both totally unforeseeable and totally unpredictable outcomes – and it is thus a waste of time trying to predict or analyse the what will happen at leadership transitions. Westerners who dare to try are dismissed as not being able to ‘understand China’. It is, however, an indisputable fact that Chinese and non-Chinese scholars can and have correctly predicted the membership of the PBSC ahead of time with a remarkable degree of accuracy, delivering crucial insight and analysis on the likely outcomes ahead of time.

But why is this any use? Does it really matter if it is possible to foresee the composition of the PBSC a few weeks or days before the official announcement on Chinese state television? Is all the effort really worth it? The short answer is yes. It's incredibly valuable for foreign governments, investors, as well as for academics, economists or anybody else making long-term predictions about China's future. The 21st century will likely be defined by the rise of China. There is no escaping the fact that any comprehensive projections need to take into account future leadership transitions, a skill best developed through practice.

Now that those issues are settled, let's shed some light on things.

How key personnel decisions are made, who takes them, and the factors at play

The official explanation for how the aforementioned bodies are filled is that the Central Committee

selects the Politburo, who then selects the Politburo Standing Committee, who in turn selects the General Secretary. In reality, the decisions are taken through a complex mix of negotiations between individual leaders (particularly the paramount leader of the country), the outgoing members of said bodies, factions within the Party, and Party elders. The process is intricate in the extreme, with trade-offs and deal making between the various stakeholders eventually resulting in the final composition being decided, which is usually a compromise of sorts. What is most important to underline is that while the role of the leader of the Party is key, it is far from guaranteed that the incumbent leader will get what they want.

That being said, there is no doubt that the role of General Secretary will be more significant than in previous years. By any yardstick, Chinese President Xi Jinping heads into the reshuffle with a level of influence in the proceedings unprecedented since the era of Deng Xiaoping. He has consolidated his power faster than any Chinese leader in the reform era, and is in a formidable position to influence proceedings. But contrary to what some may say, Xi's power has its limits. He is constrained by a huge number of conventions, which will be examined later.

But how does an aspiring contender for top leadership in China make it to the top? In a word, it is through '*guanxi*', a Chinese term referring to the fostering of close personal ties between two individuals. Cultivating an extensive *guanxi* network that transcends factional lines and includes high ranking officials is imperative for career advancement in the Chinese political system. *Guanxi* networks puts cadres in a position to perform favours for each other, with the superior conferring protection and a pupillage on the subordinate, while the subordinate provides support for the superior. Ultimately, it is the strength of candidates' *guanxi* networks which is the single most important factor in personnel appointments, largely because of the impact personal ties have on the formation of cliques and factional ties.

In illustrating how *guanxi* networks influence appointments at the very highest levels of leadership, Scholar Jing Huang proposes that at the top level of leadership, "the supreme leader entrusts more power to his most loyal and capable follower in order to secure his control and to prevent instability at the time of his departure. Yet, the latter's rapid expansion will eventually jeopardise the dominant leader's position." The best example of this playing out is not seen in China, but in East Germany. Then-leader Walter Ulbricht was ousted by his protege Erich Honecker, who by the 1970s had taken control of economic policy and had accrued great influence over personnel appointments. Honecker manipulated the reception behind the iron curtain to the thawing of tensions between East and West Germany for his own gain and prevented Ulbricht from consolidating his position. This was largely achieved through using his new influence over Party appointments by blocking Ulbricht's loyalists promotion to high office (thereby preventing Ulbricht from introducing new players into the struggle to reduce Honecker's influence relative to Honecker himself). After securing Soviet backing, Honecker then clearly assumed the position of leader of the country, which was followed by him receiving formal positions to correspond with said status. Such scenarios can still occur at the very highest levels of leadership in China, as there are no institutionalised mechanisms to prevent it.

If there is one single distinguishing characteristic to the Chinese political system it is the enduring prevalence of factionalism. There is no aspect of Chinese politics so little understood, so little studied by academics, and yet so crucially important. Truly endemic after decades of taking root, all aspects of the appointment system at high levels are in some way related to larger power plays being played out between factions. Naturally, *guanxi* is key to the existence of factions; with factions themselves essentially being composed of interconnected networks of political connections. These then form a more coherent group of individuals, who though not necessarily sharing the same (or even many) of the same views on policy, rely on each other for their political survival. But the Chinese political system and the key players within it are not all black and white with regard to factional affiliation, but often varying shades of grey. Within factions themselves, smaller cliques

form, leading some onlookers to proclaim them factions in their own right, adding to the confusion. Factionalism is what truly gives Chinese politics its reputation for being a smoke and mirrors game.

Factions, and the deals struck between them, are at the very heart of the appointment process at virtually every level of the Party and government – and this only intensifies the further up the chain of command one goes. Factors including a truly criminal lack of institutionalisation of power, patron-client relations amongst cadres, and unclear policy-making guidelines have made factionalism an enduring, and likely permanent, feature on the Chinese political landscape. While factions are ultimately focused on accruing power, they also represent different constituencies and interests – and to a lesser extent, policy goals.

Some argue factions emerge primarily due to agreements and disagreements on a policy-making level. This was certainly the case in the 1980s, with the Party being broadly divided between reformists and hardliners. These divisions, or at least the remnants of them, still exist today, but tend to cross factional lines in that there are both reformers and hardliners within both major factions – particularly on the issue of economic reform. This is demonstrated by the fact that Xi's inner circle of confidantes includes both nationalistic hawks like Liu Yuan, and fierce economic reformers such as Liu He. The simple fact is differences over policy are no longer the primary reason behind the formation and maintenance of significant, bona fide factions within the Party.

What is known in Chinese as '*mishu*', which literally translates as 'office clerk' but is better understood as referring to patron-client relations, also plays a key role in building careers and in factionalism in the Party. Lucian Pye noted in the 1970s how the role of *mishu* is steeped in Confucian political culture, and it has been hugely significant in grooming the Fifth and Sixth Generation of leaders for top leadership, rooting out the pretenders along the way. Xi Jinping served as *mishu* to then vice premier Geng Biao, who himself was once *mishu* to Xi's father. A *mishu* group must definitely does not represent a faction in its own right, but collections of overlapping *mishu* is critical to the formation, maintenance and strengthening of factions.

Despite some lone voices who argue to the contrary, most analysts of Chinese politics accept the Party can be divided into two broad factions. The first is what has been termed by analyst Cheng Li as the Jiang-Xi camp. This includes what remains of Jiang's 'Shanghai Gang', the name given to his own personal faction that distinguished themselves by serving in Shanghai before making it to Beijing. The faction has undergone an evolution not dissimilar to the experience of the 'religious right' in the U.S.; namely, it has evolved and changed significantly, but is still recognisable to what it was a decade ago. The so-called 'Shaanxi gang' and other informal groupings associated with Zhejiang and Fujian have been co-opted into the faction by Xi, along with another crucial element – the Princelings – namely, the offspring of retired Party officials. Chief among them is Xi himself. The Jiang-Xi faction has of late stolen the populist rhetoric previously championed by the Youth League faction, which has intensified under Xi's leadership.

The other major faction is often referred to as the 'Youth League faction', so named as many of the cadres which the body is composed of have risen to prominence through the CCP's youth organisation, the Communist Youth League. Many of the most high-profile Youth League faction members come from humble beginnings, having risen to the top from total obscurity. Examples include former President Hu Jintao and Premier Li Keqiang. Unlike the Jiang-Xi camp, the Youth League faction has not undergone any significant evolution over the last decade, with its members continuing to strike a broadly similar tone and advocate for similar policies. The faction is seen by supporters and detractors as being more representative of the working class and other marginalised groups in society than the Jiang-Xi camp, and generally supports policies which favour said groups. This was exemplified by the popular former Premier Wen Jiabao, who meticulously cultivated a down-to-earth 'man of the people' image somewhat inspired by Mao's right-hand man, Zhou Enlai.

What is crucial to underline is that both factions share certain common goals and objectives. The Jiang-Xi camp and the Youth League faction do not effectively function as two different political parties. Shared goals include maintaining a high economic growth rate, preserving social stability, and above all else, the maintenance of one-party rule. Cross-factional co-operation on these issues, while certainly not institutionalised, regularly occurs when it is to both sides' benefit. The negotiations and deal-cutting between factions in the lead up to Party Congresses is typically far from cordial. Reports are impossible to verify, but sometimes the infighting surfaces in the open. Xi Jinping vanished for several weeks on the eve of the 18th Party Congress in 2012 in what was widely seen as a protest against outgoing President Hu Jintao's plan to remain CMC chair for an extra two years. With the number of ambitious cadres far outranking the most coveted positions of power, by all accounts, deterioration of relations between the two major camps during personnel negotiations have in the past threatened to tear the Party apart. If Xi is genuinely seeking an extended stay in office, he threatens to drive a huge wedge between the two factions and leave a permanent scar on the factional landscape of the Party.

Hence, a degree of factional balance throughout the institutions of the Party is imperative not just for good and effective governance, but for the sake of party unity and stability. It remains a long-standing convention to this day. It is not only inadvisable, but also politically very difficult for Xi to stack the PBSC with only his loyalists - not to mention potentially unnecessary for achieving Xi's policy-making goals - which above all else is to build a more prosperous, proud and assertive China. Dominance by one faction, and the attitude towards dissent that said dominance encourages, can lead to major instability within the Party as negative sentiment towards the dominant faction can potentially build up like a dam. Factionalism, and the lack of institutionalisation which is the root cause of it, can also lead to a vulnerability to crises due to the blurred chain of command which results.

Then there is the shadowy role played by the Organisation Department. Journalist Richard McGregor explains the role of secretive bureau perhaps better than anyone, writing that "The best way to get a sense of the dimensions of the department's job is to conjure up an imaginary parallel body in Washington. A similar department in the US would oversee the appointment of the entire US cabinet, state governors and their deputies, the mayors of major cities, the heads of all federal regulatory agencies, the chief executives of GE, Exxon-Mobile, Wal-Mart and about fifty of the remaining largest US companies, the justices on the Supreme Court, the editors of the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post, the bosses of the TV networks and cable stations, the presidents of Yale and Harvard and other big universities, and the heads of the think-tanks like the Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation. Not only that, the vetting process would take place behind closed doors, and the appointments announced without any accompanying explanation why they had been made."

The operative word here is "oversee". The Organisation Department does not appoint, but rather *approves* candidates for promotion. It quite literally produces a report card (of sorts) on cadres' performances and can, on that basis, make recommendations for further promotion. The significance and role in appointments of the Organisation Department varies on a case to case basis, but it is often extremely influential in preparing the initial starting points from which the political jockeying begins, in that it produces 'report cards' well in advance of any decisions on personnel appointments being made. No credible leaks of such material has reached the public domain since the 1990s, so the workings and current influence of the department are shrouded in mystery. The role of Head of the Organisation Department is often used as a challenging brief to test the metal of top leadership contenders, and is currently headed by Zhao Leji, a leading candidate for promotion to the PBSC.

But regardless of how different factions or the role or the precise role of the Organisation Department is defined or viewed, one thing is clear: the Jiang-Xi faction truly dominates the

outgoing PBSC, with only one member (Premier Li Keqiang) being from the Youth League faction. Whether that will change or not will depend on the outcomes of negotiations between the factions, but there is a growing sense that factional politics has become less volatile in its outcomes, if not in the ferocity of infighting. The likelihood of a more even share of the spoils at the reshuffle is considerably higher than many analysts have predicted. Still, only time will tell.

Rules and Conventions

The Chinese political system is awash with conventions, but there are few, if any, hard and fast rules. Every reshuffle sees conventions broken. What is unclear is whether we will see Xi rip the rule book to shreds or see him pay respect (or at least manoeuvring round or bending) of convention on Xi's part. All of the issues raised below will be analysed further when looking at potential post-Congress scenarios.

Prior to 2002, it was generally understood that PBSC and Politburo members usually retire at the Congress following their seventieth birthday. At the 16th Party Congress fifteen years ago, retiring President Jiang Zemin wished to prevent his bitter enemy Li Ruihuan from serving another term on the PBSC, and his determination was such that he introduced a retirement age of sixty eight for all top level leadership positions, forcing Li to step down. Given its origins, the 'seven up, eight down' convention can be seen as lacking legitimacy in some respects, but the fact remains it has been adhered to without exception since its inception. This is an issue of critical importance as we head into the reshuffle largely because of the case of one man; Wang Qishan. Wang has led Xi's signature anticorruption campaign, which has caught incredibly senior officials (albeit selectively) in the campaign's wide dragnet, including (for the first time ever), a former PBSC member, Zhou Yongkang. Any bending of the rule, even for someone with the status and record of Wang Qishan, would be a major break of convention and incredibly controversial. However, if Xi wishes to serve more than two terms, it seems likely he would prepare the groundwork for this by allowing Wang Qishan (and perhaps others) to serve beyond the age of sixty eight, as in 2022 he will also be past the retirement age. More on this later.

The principle of collective leadership could also restrict Xi's options ahead of the reshuffle. This refers to the fact that the General Secretary heads up the PBSC, acting as a 'first among equals' on the body, which historically makes decisions collectively by majority verdict. While each PBSC member is given responsibility for specific policy areas, these are not as clearly defined as the portfolio given to ministers in the cabinet system in the U.S. and UK. Xi has undermined this convention on many fronts since taking office. Leading Small Groups, created ostensibly to support the work of the PBSC and the wider Politburo, have increasingly served as an avenue for Xi to consolidate his stranglehold on the policy-making process. However, the principle remains significant, if not sacred, and any attempt to undermine it, whether through adjusting the size of the PBSC or stacking it with Xi loyalists, is likely to be met with resistance.

Another important convention has been variously described as the principle of 'cross-generation designation of successors' and the 'grandpa-designated successor'. This refers to the tradition of the leader of the country picking not his successor, but the successor to his own successor. Deng Xiaoping earmarked Hu Jintao, then the relatively obscure Party Secretary of Tibet, as a future President, describing him as "not bad". Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, was instrumental in the ultimately successful effort to install Xi Jinping as General Secretary over incumbent Prime Minister Li Keqiang. Sinologist Willy Lam writes that Jiang was said to be ecstatic that he had managed to ensure the tradition of the 'grandpa-designated successor' continued. The principle is especially significant owing to the fact that the kingmaker this time round should in theory be Hu Jintao, who has left nobody under any illusions as to who he wishes to succeed Xi. Hu Chunhua (who is profiled later) is Hu's clear preference for the top job. However, as will be discussed later, Hu Jintao's

capacity to influence proceedings is not thought to be high.

Other conventions relating to personnel appointments include the principle of factional rotation. However, the impact, and even the existence of the convention, is disputed. There have only been two peaceful transfers of power under CCP rule, which limits the amount of evidence available to examine the claim. Nonetheless, the doctrine provides a satisfactory explanation for why the Youth League faction was happy to accept its near wipeout on the PBSC (with just one member out of seven on the Committee at present). Another tradition is that PBSC hopefuls must have already served a term on the wider Politburo. While there is a precedent for the elevation of leaders directly from the Central Committee to the PBSC (skipping the 'hoop' of the enlarged Politburo), this has only been achieved by Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang- who enjoyed long-standing status as the two future top leadership frontrunners.

Without further ado, let's introduce the key players



Xi Jinping The only person truly guaranteed a spot on the incoming PBSC is incumbent General Secretary, CMC chair and Chinese President Xi Jinping. For the purposes of this article, there is little point in writing yet another biography about Xi's life, but instead to discuss what is not yet known - Xi's strategy for the leadership reshuffle.

In short, some believe Xi is seeking to further consolidate his position with an eye to staying in a formal position of power beyond 2022. Others believe that whatever his deepest desires, head will rule over heart and Xi will instead opt for a more consensus-driven path and allow multiple Youth League faction cadres onto the PBSC. The indications in the weeks leading up to the Congress seem to suggest the latter is more likely, but there is simply no way of telling ahead of time. Also of significance is whether Xi will seek to block the elevation of sixth-generation cadres to the PBSC, with the aim of removing any obstacles to him continuing as President beyond 2022. All of these scenarios will be examined in much greater detail later.



Li Keqiang has served in the number two job as Premier, for almost five years, but has suffered from a seriously decline in clout since taking office, being the biggest victim of Xi's rapid consolidation of power. Dubbed the 'PhD Premier', Chinese state media was awash in the early stages of the Xi-Li administration with talk of 'Likonomics', praising Li's understanding of the problems facing the

Chinese economy to the skies. But no longer. Li has been systematically undermined by Xi from the off, and as the only Youth League faction member in the PBSC, he has stood alone and weak in a losing battle to cling onto his gradually dwindling influence at the top table. Xi's creation of the Central Leading Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reforms has further robbed Li of any responsibility he might (and officially should) possess on the critical issue of economic reform.

Li's position is such that there have been unsubstantiated rumours circulating that Li will step down as Premier to be replaced by Wang Qishan, or even Wang Yang, with Li instead seeing out five more years on the PBSC in a less senior position, such as NPC or CPPCC chair. While this possibility cannot be discounted entirely, it is incredibly unlikely and would represent a break of what is arguably the most inflexible convention in Chinese politics - that the President and Premier are to serve ten years together leading the administration. It seems incredibly unlikely Xi would rock the boat and push for the demotion of the already marginalised Premier, especially given Li is unable to affect the policy-making process in a significant way - at least relative to Xi. While it would be a huge statement of intent, it would require vast amounts of political capital and open an enormous rift within the Party, without necessarily accomplishing any major consolidation of power on Xi's part. It is thus all but guaranteed that Li will remain as Premier for another five years.



Dubbed 'China's enforcer', 'graft buster in-chief' and even 'the firefighter', Wang Qishan has played a pivotal role within the Xi administration. Having displayed an administrative flair throughout his career, his greatest feat yet has been heading up Xi's flagship anticorruption drive. The scale, significance and perceived success (at least within China) of the drive is difficult to do justice to, as is the critical role Wang has played in carrying it out. Described by former U.S. Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson as "a committed reformer" and "a savvy up-and-comer with impeccable connections", Wang is also unusually frank and decisive - rare qualities for a Chinese politician. He has also enjoyed a friendship with Xi for decades.

Ordinarily, his age would deal a fatal blow to any chances of remaining on the PBSC, but such is his contribution over the last five years to the Xi administration, speculation is rife that he may be allowed to serve another term and perhaps even take the place of Li Keqiang as Premier. Most analysts maintain that it remains politically very difficult for Xi to do this, despite Wang's achievements. Others believe Xi has already thrown the rulebook out of the window, and has little to fear from extending Wang's tenure on the PBSC.



The favourite to succeed Xi, Chen Min'er worked alongside the President in Zhejiang, where Chen was instrumental in ensuring Xi's efforts were well-received in the Chinese media. Chen is part of what has been nicknamed the 'new Zhejiang Army' - a group of officials who made their name while serving in Zhejiang while Xi was Party Secretary during the mid-2000s. After becoming the governor and later Party Secretary of Guizhou province, Chen became Party Secretary of Chongqing earlier this year. Many have drawn parallels between Xi's brief spell as Party chief of Shanghai in the run up to the 2007 Party Congress and Chen's short tenure in Chongqing, believing it to be an audition of sorts for the very highest office.

Chen faces stiff competition in his bid to succeed Xi. It is far from guaranteed he will even bag a PBSC seat - and unlike rivals Wang Yang and Hu Chunhua, he does not sit on the Politburo at present, which may hamper his promotion prospects. While his position was certainly bolstered by the removal of Chongqing Party Secretary and rival for the Presidency Sun Zhengcai (not least because he stepped in to replace him in Chongqing), Chen will also have to contend with the aforementioned convention of the 'grandpa-designated successor' - which if respected, will hang Chen out to dry. Regardless, Chen remains the undoubted favourite to succeed Xi.



The diametric opposite of former Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai, Wang's stock rose sharply when Bo was implicated in the murder of British businessman Neil Heywood. While Bo's 'Chongqing model' advocated for state-led investment in the economy, draconian crackdowns on organised crime and espoused nostalgia and support for the values of the Mao era, Wang's liberal attitude in governing Guangdong emphasised support for market-based economic reforms, technological innovation and investment in infrastructure. Both, however, have in the past engaged quite openly in a form of lobbying that is alien to the Chinese political system, something that aggravated certain people across the Party and was a contributing factor in seeing Wang miss out on a PBSC seat in 2012. Wang is also seen as a top contender to succeed Li Keqiang as Premier, with many speculating Hu Jintao wishes to see an administration lead by Hu Chunhua as President and Wang as Prime Minister take charge in 2022. Hu Chunhua's loyalty to his boss, coupled with Wang's reformist credentials and brash personality has ensured he plays second fiddle in Hu Jintao's plan to ensure a Youth League cadre takes the helm in 2022. This could easily be reversed in time, and given the murky waters of Chinese politics, the Youth League's preferred running order may have already changed.

In the run up to the 18th Party Congress in 2012, mere rumours of Premier Li Keqiang's support for ideas including judicial independence and constitutional government during his student days were enough to seriously damage his standing among party hardliners, contributing to him falling short of the top job. Whether Wang is truly seen as a reformer within the Party's upper echelons is another question entirely; the answer to which is unclear. Regardless, he is admired even by his critics for his charisma, intelligence and track record in government. He is a highly capable official widely seen as possessing ability worthy of a PBSC seat. Xi will almost certainly not wish to see Wang on PBSC, but if the Youth League faction make his promotion a red line, Xi will struggle to cut a deal to keep Wang off the PBSC.



Said to be closer than any other politician to Xi, Li Zhanshu has served as Director of the General Office since 2012, a role more commonly referred to as chief of staff to the President. The role is the ultimate expression of the aforementioned phenomenon of *mishu*, with the holder serving as the most senior aide in government. While his predecessor's career quite literally ended in a car crash, unlike most holders of the role, Li sits on the Politburo and is amongst the leading contenders for a seat at the top table. Like Xi, Li is also a princeling, with his great-uncle having served as Vice Governor of Shandong.

Li's factional affiliation is also to his benefit. While he is a princeling by birthright, Li also has close ties to the Youth League, having served as Hebei Communist Youth League Secretary in the late 1980s. Remarkably, Li is also linked to the Shanghai Gang through his patronage by Jia Qinglin, a key ally of former President Jiang Zemin. He also has some provincial leadership experience, having served as governor of Heilongjiang province and Guizhou Party Secretary. All this, combined with his closeness to Xi, puts Li in a position to reduce factional tensions and stands him in good stead for promotion. Of all the contenders listed here, Li is arguably the favourite to join the PBSC.



Having served as Head of the powerful Organisation Department since 2012, Zhao Leji is an unusual candidate for high office. Prior to 2012, he was not clearly aligned with either major faction, but is now a close confidante of Xi himself, having followed in Xi's footsteps when he served as Party Secretary of Shaanxi province from 2007-12. However, his predecessor as Organisation Department chief, Li Yuanchao, fell short of a widely anticipated elevation to the PBSC five years ago. Still, Zhao is also relatively young - being born in 1957 makes him a Sixth Generation cadre, and helps put him

firmly in the hunt for a PBSC seat and possibly even the Presidency. His age means he may have a second bite of the cherry in 2022 if he fails to win promotion this week.

Zhao's service in the far west in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region is to his benefit; if he joins the PBSC he will follow in a long line of leaders who have served in the backwater regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, which includes former President Hu Jintao. His lack of obvious factional ties, coupled with the remarkable lack of information surrounding both his career and personal ties makes his promotion prospects still less clear. At the last Party Congress in 2012, those without clear factional affiliation fared well, but that is far from a guarantee of success this time round. His potential promotion is amongst the most intriguing unanswered questions to be answered on Wednesday.



Ahead of the reshuffle, no one has been left in any doubt that Hu Chunhua is the choice of former President Hu Jintao to succeed Xi. Dubbed 'little Hu' to differentiate him from his patron, Hu Chunhua has served in the important posting of Party Secretary of Guangdong, China's most prosperous province since 2012, and before that as Party Secretary of Inner Mongolia. Hu is among the top picks to succeed Xi for many analysts, with former President Hu signalling his clear support for him through recent public appearances alongside each other. Hu represents the brightest prospect for top leadership for the Youth League faction along with Vice Premier Wang Yang.

However, Hu Jintao is not predicted to be influential in the selection of the new PBSC members. His influence undeniably pales in comparison to the role played by party elders in the 1980s. That said, the former President is not totally without ability to affect the proceedings. An important convention states he should be the one to choose Xi's successor.

Hu has not impressed everybody during his tenure in Guangdong. A wealthy Shenzhen businessman who had met with Hu multiple times mocked him, calling him a "political leper", adding that he had risen through the ranks "largely by luck and with Chairman Hu's backing". Nonetheless, Hu's report card in Guangdong is solid, if not particularly dazzling. Growth has remained steady, and his deft handling of the potentially explosive situation in the 'democracy village' of Wukan can only be called impressive. His position as a frontrunner to succeed Xi has certainly been consolidated to one degree or another by Sun Zhengcai's removal, but few would dispute Chen Min'er has gained more politically from the move. This is because Sun and Chen previously held the status as the two top leadership frontrunners from Xi's faction - now only Chen remains from that group. His chances remain strong, and convention dictates the previous President (Hu Jintao) is to choose who succeeds his successor. There is, however, ample evidence this convention will be unceremoniously abandoned, even though it has endured for decades. More on this later.



Once tipped as a possible future President, Han Zheng has spent the whole of his career in Shanghai, and is rumoured to be among the frontrunners for the post of Premier when Li Keqiang steps down. Closely associated with former leader Jiang Zemin, Han was fortunate in the extreme for surviving the purge of the Shanghai Party apparatus following the dramatic purge of then-Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Liangyu in 2006, whom Han was close to. While he is a gifted administrator, the reason his career has thrived over the last decade has been more down to good fortune than anything else. Han rode his luck over a series of scandals, from the aforementioned fall of Chen Liangyu, to apartment fires and building collapses.

His chances will be hurt by the fact that long spells in top provincial leadership positions have become a hallmark of the PBSC membership. Nonetheless, Han's lack of provincial experience did not prevent him from becoming Shanghai Party Secretary, a position of real significance which is accompanied by a seat on the Politburo. A brief spell working for the Youth League early on in his career is certainly a feather in his cap. His record of achievement is overall impressive, which combined with his relatively close ties to Xi, gives him a fighting chance for promotion to the PBSC.

IMAGE While Han Zheng has no experience in political leadership outside of Shanghai, ideology tsar Wang Huning has none at all. Once seen as being firmly in former President Jiang's 'Shanghai Gang' faction, Wang astonishingly went on to work as a top aide for each of the last three Chinese Presidents, forming a key part of each administration and being part of the entourage on their foreign visits overseas. This straddling of an increasingly wide factional divide is rarely seen at such high levels of leadership as the Politburo, but betrays more about Wang's talent for getting things done than any masterful political manoeuvring on his part.



Originally an academic by trade, he has served as Director of the Central Policy Research Office, as well as playing a key role in foreign policy formulation, ranking above Foreign Minister Wang Yi (which, despite being high-profile position and despite the connotations of the job title, is actually not a particularly important post in the Chinese political system). Wang is also said to have been instrumental in formulating the theoretical bases for the theories of the 'three represents' and 'scientific outlook on development', the ideological contributions of former President Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao to the Party constitution. He is also part of Xi's inner circle of confidantes - but is said to be extremely modest to the point of (allegedly) not aspiring to a top leadership position.

Wang's chances for promotion are incredibly difficult to estimate. Ordinarily, a total lack of provincial leadership would render promotion to the Politburo (which Wang already sits on) let alone the PBSC, a mere pipe dream. Many would argue, however, that Wang's truly unique experience more than makes up for any lack of time served in the provinces. His experience working for former leaders from across the Party may also make him acceptable to the powers that be across factional lines. The likely promotion of Li Zhanshu could hurt his chances as it would raise eyebrows to see the promotion of more than one technocrat who has made their name in Beijing. Whether or not he will join the top table is perhaps the most interesting unanswered question ahead of the reshuffle - the answer to which could shape expectations as to the experience potential PBSC members must have. Watch this space.

And some outsiders for promotion to the PBSC...

Cai Qi: Beijing Party boss Cai Qi has enjoyed a meteoric rise over the last two years. Very much Xi's man - he is said to be close to the President - Cai seems destined for a seat on the wider Politburo. Indeed, the position he currently occupies; namely, Party Secretary of Beijing, traditionally comes with a Politburo seat (though these are non-transferable and only filled at Party Congresses, hence why Cai did not join the Politburo when he received the posting in 2016). Were he promoted to the inner sanctum of the PBSC, it would be arguably the fastest rise to the top table ever seen - he currently does not even sit on the 370-strong Central Committee at present - but Xi willing, he may just go all the way. His promotion would likely only be possible if Xi embarked on a successful effort to throw out the rule book and decide the appointments to the PBSC on his own terms.

Liu He: Similarly, Liu He is another official who has risen from relative obscurity largely thanks to being a confidante of Xi. Liu is widely seen as being very influential in economic policy formulation in recent years, heading up the Leading Group on economic reform. Upon Xi introducing Liu to U.S. National Security advisor Tom Dillon, the President is reported to have remarked "This is Liu He. He is very important to me." However, close ties to the leader, even one of Xi's stature, is far from a guarantee of a PBSC seat - simple arithmetic alone on the number of seats available puts paid to that argument. Also, it is important to remember that anyone who is not a member of the Politburo is naturally up against it in terms of their prospects for promotion to the PBSC.

Sun Chunlan: The only woman even remotely in contention for a PBSC seat, Sun Chunlan has served as Head of the United Front Work Department since 2012. Liu Yandong fell short of being the first woman to sit on the PBSC five years ago, and it seems likely Sun will share the same fate, despite Sun's long experience in provincial leadership positions. Distinguished China analyst Cheng Li gives her more of a chance than most, recently commenting that Sun has a 'five to ten percent chance' of making it to the PBSC. Sun is thus a real outside shot for a PBSC seat, but is certainly remains in the running. Sun is considered a member of the Youth League faction, which is likely to be detrimental to her prospects for promotion, as does her gender. Few in the Party are minded to see a woman appointed to the PBSC. Her age means this will be here last opportunity for promotion. Another term on the Politburo, but not the PBSC, beckons.

Liu Qibao: Youth League cadre Liu Qibao was thrown in the deep end as new Party Secretary of Sichuan province when the devastating Earthquake of 2008 hit. It had the potential to derail his political career, but the relatively swift response and successful recovery effort showed him to be capable of handling the situation. He worked for the Communist Youth League during the 1980s, at one point serving alongside Premier Li Keqiang, and has also regularly authored articles in the Party's journal *Seeking Truth*. He has served as propaganda chief since 2012; also serving on the Politburo. While in the hunt for a PBSC seat, the small number of seats available makes his promotion unlikely, but not impossible.

Some real outsiders for a PBSC seat include Zhang Chunxian, Chen Quanguo, Li Hongzhong, Xu Qianglin and Li Yuanchao. While their chances cannot be discounted entirely, their chances are not good enough to warrant a detailed examination of their backgrounds.

Analysis

In analysing what the state of the players means for possible outcomes of the reshuffle, even those who most fervently believe Xi is seeking a third term must accept such speculation would be inevitable given such a rapid consolidation of power. It is important not to confuse this with a desire to rule indefinitely. Many took the purge of Sun Zhengcai as an indication Xi is seeking to remove possible successors in preparation to serve as leader for longer than ten years. However, there glaring signs that Xi has manoeuvred Chen Min'er into position to succeed him in 2022.

Prior to his elevation to the PBSC ten years ago, Xi briefly served as Party Secretary of Shanghai in what is widely seen as a crucial period in his career. Stepping in to replace the disgraced Chen Liangyu, Xi finally gained the upper hand over Li Keqiang, putting him in pole position to succeed Hu Jintao. He also oversaw the merger of his own cliques formed in Zhejiang and Shaanxi (along with the Princelings), with the Shanghai Gang, an all-important step in consolidating his position along with his that of his faction. In advance of the upcoming leadership reshuffle, Chen Min'er's career has mirrored Xi's to a remarkable degree. Just a few months ago, Chen was appointed Party Secretary of Chongqing in the wake of the purge of a high-profile predecessor (and rival for the top leadership) in the form of Sun Zhengcai. This can only be viewed as positioning Xi positioning Chen for promotion to the PBSC. It would make little sense for Xi to allow Chen's rise if he were seeking to rule indefinitely.

With everything taken into account, the signs are clear that Chen Min'er is Xi's preferred successor. Whether Hu Jintao and the Youth League will be able to put a halt to this remains to be seen, but appears unlikely. Chen's accession to the PBSC is far from an inevitability. A failure to win promotion will not doom Chen's chances of succeeding Xi - far from it. It is entirely plausible (and many would argue more likely) that Chen will serve another term on the wider Politburo before. While those who believe Xi is seeking a third term argue he would prevent any promotion of younger cadres to the PBSC, he could well be manoeuvring Chen Min'er as a back-up plan in case his bid to serve an extra term (or more) fails. As aforementioned, while Xi and Li were promoted to the PBSC directly from the Central Committee, and serving a full five year term on the Politburo before further promotion clearly remains an expectation of sorts among elements of the Party. Given Chen is not on the Politburo at present, an initial promotion to said level may instead be in the offing.

On the other hand, there are those who argue Xi's authority more than compensates for Chen Min'er's lack of experience. The fact that the information flow on factional struggles within the Party has markedly decreased over the last decade also makes such a prolonged spell as a future leadership frontrunner a far more difficult status to obtain.

Nonetheless, as early as 2000, some twelve years in advance of their respective appointments to President and Premier respectively, it was clear that Xi and Li were the frontrunners for top leadership of the fifth generation. Andrew Nathan and Bruce Gilley wrote in their 2002 book *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files* identified Xi, Li and Bo Xilai as the three frontrunners for top leadership, correctly predicting (in the face of most forecasts at the time) Xi, not Li, would emerge as the frontrunner and eventually take the Presidency. Chen Min'er has unquestionably not held the status of 'Crown Prince' for nearly as long - and arguably does not even enjoy it today.

The leaked documents that Nathan and Gilley's book was based on were enormously prescient in noting twelve years ahead off time that Xi's greatest asset would be "his lack of a clear ideological

position, which allows hard-line and liberal officials alike to support him". It was for this reason that Xi enjoyed broad support across the Party - in a straw poll conducted around the time of the Congress in 2007 surveying the 370-strong Central Committee, Party elders and other senior figures, Xi was said to have done significantly better than his primary rival Li Keqiang. This, combined with the influence of former leader Jiang Zemin and the fallout of the Ling Gu affair, eventually ensured it was to be Xi, not Li, that would succeed Hu. With regard to Chen's case, on balance, the signs are he will join the PBSC.

Little to no elevation of Sixth Generation officials, coupled with the promotion of Chen Min'er to either the wider Politburo or the PBSC, could be indicative of Xi taking such the approach of staying on beyond 2022. Equally, Xi could push for more diverse factional representation on the PBSC and still manoeuvre for the same outcome. The fact remains that the upcoming leadership reshuffle is far from the be all and end all of Chinese political dynamics for the foreseeable future.

Perhaps the most crucial of all conventions heading into the reshuffle is the doctrine of the 'grandpa-designated successor'. If said convention is respected, there can be no doubt that Hu Chunhua will be the next leader of China. Equally, if the disputed doctrine of factional rotation is obeyed (if it even exists), Hu Chunhua is assured of the Presidency. It will be incredibly difficult for Xi to prevent the accession of both Hu Chunhua and Wang Yang to the PBSC, should he desire to. The glaring lack of Youth League representation on the PBSC (even if this is mitigated by strong representation on other bodies of great significance) is something Youth League patrons will want to compensate for. The doctrine of factional balance also improves the chances of Wang and Hu, given the lack of Youth League members on the present PBSC.

Another important issue heading into the reshuffle is whether Wang Qishan will serve another term on the PBSC. While Wang has proven invaluable during Xi's first five years in office, convention dictates he must step down as he has reached the official retirement age. The regulations surrounding this were discussed earlier and need not be gotten into once more. The relative inflexibility of the convention, coupled with the fact it is not essential for Xi to keep Wang on to achieve his policy objectives make it increasingly unlikely Xi will stir controversy and push for Wang to remain on the PBSC. Either way, what is certain is that Wang will play a significant role over the coming years - regardless of whether he continues to hold a formal position of power. With everything taken into account, the indication is Wang's chances of staying on the PBSC have dipped below fifty per cent.

Some predictions - and what they will mean

There will undoubtedly be many surprises next week, and probably some relating to the composition of the PBSC. Any predictions are highly likely to be off the mark to one degree or another. But it would be rude and overly cautious not to make some.

In the interests of brevity, the possible post-Congress scenarios can be narrowed down to the following broad and mutually exclusive outcomes:

1. No promotion of Sixth Generation cadres to the PBSC - paving the way for Xi to serve at least 3 terms as General Secretary
2. The promotion of a single clear successor from Xi's faction (most likely Chen Min'er) to the PBSC
3. The promotion of several Sixth Generation cadres (likely including Chen Min'er, Wang Yang and Hu Chunhua) from multiple different factions, leaving no clear successor to Xi

To cut to the chase, my own opinion is scenario three is the most likely event to occur. However, conventional wisdom amongst western analysts and journalists most definitely points to scenario one playing out. The image of Xi amongst said people is of a dictator determined to make his mark on China, and rule for considerably longer than ten years, perhaps even indefinitely. The dramatic fall from grace of Sun Zhengcai, once believed by some to be Xi's choice to succeed him, has been interpreted by some as a statement of intent on the part of Xi to rule for longer than ten years. But it is hardly out of the ordinary for the purge of a high-profile figure to occur on the eve of a Party Congress. In terms of significance and sheer drama, Sun's removal is positively eclipsed by the astonishing fall of Bo Xilai in the lead up to the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Such moves are not new and shouldn't be read into too much - Sun's ousting appears to be nothing more than Xi removing an undesirable from the scene in advance of the Congress. This is neither astonishing nor shocking, and should not have come as a surprise to most. To paraphrase analyst Cheng Li, it is important not to confuse an effective leader with a dictator.

Crucially, even if Xi does wish to exert great power beyond 2022, there would certainly be no need for him so occupy a formal post. Xi will be extremely wary of how Jiang, who decided to remain in a formal position of power for two extra years than convention dictated he was entitled to, was seen as 'overstaying his welcome'. It was a move that was to cost Jiang dearly in terms of the loss of goodwill towards Jiang and his faction over the coming years. It is of crucial importance to underline the strong tradition in Chinese culture of the role of elders - extending well beyond the political sphere. Hence, the most likely scenario post-Congress is of a PBSC with a more Youth League representation, and in 2022, it is likely Xi will step down, while still exerting pervasive influence from behind the scenes. What remains unclear is who will succeed him.

Despite speculation to the contrary, it is highly unlikely the size of the PBSC will change. As discussed above, it makes little sense for Xi to push through changes that will rock the boat without necessarily consolidating his own power. The current constraints on the size of the PBSC do not prevent him from achieving his objectives, and it makes little sense for such a radical move to be taken with no clear benefits for Xi.

Predicting the new PBSC

And now for the most interesting, and by far the most difficult, prediction. This is likely to be off the mark in one way or another, but I would not be making a prediction at all without a degree of confidence in this outcome.

In descending order of rank, my prediction is that the next Politburo Standing Committee will be composed of:

1. Xi Jinping
2. Li Keqiang
3. Li Zhanshu
4. Wang Yang
5. Chen Min'er
6. Hu Chunhua or Zhao Leji
7. Wang Huning

My prediction that Xi will be happy with the status of party elder after 2022 is based on the fact that to date, Xi has not shown himself to be someone who cares much for official titles, and is more concerned with the acquisition of real political power and policy implementation than egoism. While some viewed his acquisition of 'core' status in 2016 as indicating the exact opposite, and noted it was something which was not afforded to his predecessor Hu Jintao, a better explanation is that it was an obvious way to cement his authority over the Party. Also, Hu can be seen as the exception to the rule in this case. Since its inception, the term has only seen three Chinese Presidents in total. Hu was the only one of the three not to be 'cored' - a fact some put down to modesty and others to his total lack of X. Thus, it is likely Xi will take on a role after his retirement greater than Jiang in the mid 2000s, and instead one not dissimilar to that of Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s. This would entail him being able to influence decision making on a level equal to his successor, at least for the first term of the latter's Presidency.

What is certain is that Xi would much rather see Hu Chunhua sit on the PBSC than Wang Yang, if given the choice. Rightly or wrongly, it is blindingly obvious Xi has a very low opinion of Hu's ability. If that is the case, Xi may choose to accept the convention of the 'grandpa designated successor', giving carte blanche to Hu Chunhua to succeed him. A conspiracy theory that is not without merit speculates that former President Jiang did not seek to block Hu Jintao's accession to the throne in the wake of his retirement, as Jiang believed Hu was weak enough for him to dominate his time in office. What is undeniably true is that Jiang wielded huge influence behind the scenes well into Hu's tenure, largely through his proteges (one of which was Xi), who held many positions on the PBSC. Jiang also only relinquished his office in Zhongnanhai (best described as 'China's White House') four years after his retirement from his last post. Make of that what you wish, but the possibility Xi may be happy to see a supposedly weak leader Hu Chunhua succeed him so as to tower over their tenure cannot be discounted. Much food for thought.

What all this means for China's future

The impact of the new realities of the post-Congress Chinese political system is disputed. As the outcome is far from clear, naturally so are the implications of the Congress for China's future. Most analysts accept that the two most significant areas that will likely be affected in the long term, whatever the outcome of the reshuffle, are economic growth and social stability - a decline in either of which could undermine the legitimacy of, or even bring an end to, the rule of the CCP.

Analysts' view on China's future can be broadly divided into two categories. On the one hand, there are those who believe that China must undergo a process of democratisation, or at the very least, embark on a meaningful political reform programme, in order to maintain both social stability and economic growth rates of around 7%. Chief among them is scholar of Asian affairs David Shambaugh, who argues that "China's capacity for innovation will be severely limited by its lack of political liberalisation". Shambaugh claims that continuing on the current trajectory of stagnation in the political arena will seriously hamper Chinese growth prospects in the long term.

Whether there truly is a link between political reform and continued economic growth in the Chinese context, only time will tell. The one aspect of a liberal democracy that China's political system encompasses; namely, the peaceful transfer of power (albeit not from one party to another, but from one generation to another), is undeniably smashed to pieces if Xi disrupts the standard succession template. This would be another in a long line of setbacks for political liberalisation, and if Shambaugh is to be believed, abuse of such norms will eventually (if indirectly) take a toll on the Chinese economy. On the other hand, if Xi chooses a more consensus-driven path, respects major conventions, and promotes cadres from across the Party as described in scenario three, political reform prospects will be given a boost, albeit a minor one.

The fact remains, however, that the only realistic prospects for seismic political reform in the near future rest squarely on the shoulders of Wang Yang. It is as of yet unclear whether Wang has simply played the reform card to boost his career prospects or whether he espouses such views out of genuine conviction. We may never know. In any case, there are simply no other contenders for top leadership that have given even the slightest indication of support for a substantive programme of political reform. Many speculate Wang is more likely to finish as runner-up and instead take the office of Premier. Whilst this is the second most powerful political office in China, incumbent Premier Li's predecessor Wen Jiabao showed how having a Premier firmly committed to political reform is far from a guarantee of it coming about. To succeed Xi, Wang simply must obtain a seat on the next PBSC, something (as discussed earlier) he is relatively well placed to do. But if Shambaugh's thesis is to be believed, it is not just the hopes of all who wish to see political reform in China that lay with Wang and Wang alone, but the fortunes of the Chinese economy as well.

Regardless of whether a political reform programme (or rather, a lack thereof) will affect economic performance or indeed social stability, for the time being it seems continued CCP rule is as secure as ever. Predictions of the Party's fall have come and passed without incident, and there is little threat of an overnight collapse when all potential threats to the Party's rule are disparate and disunited. Migrant labourers, the middle classes and Tibetan dissidents won't be seen marching side by side through Beijing any time soon. And given many of said groups don't even wish to see the overthrow of the Party, still less participate in any uprising, it is clear that for the foreseeable future the Party's rule is as safe as houses, no matter what happens at the reshuffle.