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# Chinese Politics Has No Rules, But It May Be Good if Xi Jinping Breaks Them

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As China's top leaders flee the oppressive summer heat of Beijing in favor of a few weeks of policy meetings and vacation at the leadership's seaside retreat at Beidaihe, the break provides a welcome opportunity to reflect upon the direction of Chinese elite politics as President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping approaches the conclusion of his first five-year term in office. If one were to try to capture in a phrase the essence of Xi's tenure thus far as China's top ruler, it could fairly be characterized as "political shock and awe." Whether it be his withering anticorruption drive that has felled both retired and active senior leaders, his radical restructuring of the world's largest fighting force in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), or his notable success in bolstering his personal stature within the leadership as the CCP's new "core" leader, it is incontrovertible that Xi has emerged as the most powerful Chinese leader in decades. And, of course, this year's leadership deliberations at Beidaihe take on a special significance given the substantial leadership turnover that will accompany this fall's 19th Party Congress. In fact—and fairly or not—the Party Congress will be viewed in the eyes of both Chinese elites and foreign observers as something of a referendum on Xi's success in establishing himself as China's unquestioned political supremo.

Given the high stakes associated with the drama that is about to unfold, it is a worthwhile—if very challenging—exercise to try to ascertain where Xi may be headed both in arranging the Politburo deck chairs at the Party Congress and in terms of the policy roadmap that may follow in the years to come. As with any such examination, it is difficult to uncover the direction of travel without first having a solid grasp on where one has been before. Much has been said and written about the trajectory of China's political evolution in the last few decades. With very few exceptions, this body of work can be summarized by the general notion that, starting with deceased paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the aftermath of the ruinous Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the succeeding generations of Chinese leaders have, despite a few ups and downs, mainly stuck to a consensus approach whereby the mechanics of leadership interactions and the handover from one leadership cohort to another has become orderly, rules-based, and predictable. Some analysts have even described this evolution as the institutionalization of Chinese politics.

## A Rulebook with No (Meaningful) Rules

But a careful study of the CCP's recent political history, or even its foundational organizing principles, seems quickly to belie such a conclusion. For starters, it is worth noting that the Party's "rulebook"—

the CCP Constitution—has very few rules, and almost none that meaningfully constrain the activities of the Party’s top powerbrokers. A review of that document shows that, aside from a largely platitudinous listing of the duties of party cadres, the number of true rules can be counted on one hand, with one finger left over. To wit:

- 1) The Constitution mandates that the Central Committee convene the National Congress of the Party every five years except in extraordinary circumstances.
- 2) The Central Committee of the Party is required to meet in plenary session at least once a year, and such sessions are convened by its Political Bureau.
- 3) The General Secretary of the Central Committee must be a member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), the Party’s top decisionmaking body.
- 4) Party cadres are not entitled to lifetime tenure.

Some scholars have argued, however, that despite the paucity of hard rules governing Chinese elite politics, the leadership has nonetheless followed a discrete series of identifiable political practices regarding senior leadership promotion and succession with very little variation going back at least two decades. Although not an exhaustive list, these customs, generally described by proponents of this analytic construct as “norms,” include the following:

- The sitting top leader of the Party will serve no more than two five-year terms as CCP general secretary before handing over that post to a successor.
- That successor will be publicly identified by advancing to the PBSC at the Party Congress marking the midpoint of the sitting party chief’s decade-long tenure and by inheriting key posts<sup>1</sup> that clearly mark him as understudy to the top leader.
- As a form of valediction and recognition of service, the outgoing leader’s contribution to the Party’s “guiding ideology” will be enshrined in the CCP Constitution.
- Advancement to—or retention on—the full Politburo will be governed by a potential candidate’s age at the time of the respective party congress.
- The number of seats on the PBSC roughly coincides with a set of defined senior leadership portfolios such as party chief, the premier, head of the legislature, propaganda czar, and so on.
- Candidates for the Politburo will have demonstrated their suitability for promotion to the Party’s highest ranks through an often decades-long series of stepwise promotions from the lowest rungs of the CCP bureaucracy, frequently having served in some combination of increasingly senior positions within the central party apparatus, the state ministries or state machinery, and in the localities.

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<sup>1</sup> These typically include the chief secretary of the CCP Secretariat—the nerve center of the Politburo—the state vice presidency, and, later on, a vice chairmanship on the Party organ that controls the PLA, the CCP Central Military Commission.

## Loose Conventions, Perhaps, But No Institutionalization

Although the patterns of promotion and associated party pronouncements of at least the last four party congresses do indicate a notional conformity to these seemingly standardized practices, a closer examination suggests that even describing them as “norms” may be too generous. Take, for example, the issue of age restrictions for the Politburo. It is generally accepted that the practice was first introduced at the 15th Party Congress in 1997, where the age limit for Politburo membership was set at 70 (with the then top leader Jiang Zemin being given a critical exemption). Five years later, at the 16th Party Congress, the age limit was reduced to 68—with no exceptions being granted—spawning the catchphrase “seven up, eight down” (七上八下). This same restriction seems to have been applied again at both the 17th (2007) and 18th (2012) Party Congresses, lending seeming credibility to its standing as a “norm.”

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

Similarly, the notion of a cadre of well-seasoned technocrats meritocratically rising through the Party’s ranks to the apex of power does not comport with the facts. Although it is true that, in the reform era, each succeeding Politburo has been better educated, increasingly cosmopolitan, and more experienced than its predecessor, this does not mean that the Party was on some inexorable path toward greater institutionalization during this period. Instead, such credentials and skills must be viewed as having been necessary, but still insufficient, grounds for promotion. There have been far too many examples of corrupt (former PBSC member Jia Qinglin) incompetent (current PBSC member Zhang Gaoli) or even potentially dangerous (former PBSC member Zhou Yongkang and fallen Xi rival and Politburo member Bo Xilai) leaders to conclude anything other than, to a greater degree than not, who a leader knows in China remains far more important than what he or she knows.

Finally, it is equally clear that, despite the veneer of greater routinization and regularization during the period, informal power remained an omnipresent force. Few scholars dispute, for example, that Deng Xiaoping cast a long shadow over Jiang Zemin’s authority for at least the first half of the latter’s tenure as top leader. And yet, despite clear and repeated manifestations of his continuing power and influence, few analysts seemed willing to credit Jiang with playing a similar role, arguably during Hu Jintao’s entire tenure. Notably, it is Xi Jinping’s rapid consolidation of power that largely has laid bare this reality. To give but one example, Xi’s designation as “core” leader at last fall’s Sixth Plenum of the

18th Central Committee highlighted several inconvenient truths for the proponents of institutionalization. First, it made clear that a critical assumption underlying the case for institutionalization—that Hu Jintao was never given “core” status because the Party had decided to abolish the moniker as part of its wholehearted embrace of norms and collective decisionmaking—was erroneous. Similarly, it strongly suggested that Jiang effectively had remained the “core” more than a decade after his formal retirement, presumably wielding the attendant at least loose veto power that logically would accompany such a status.

## Expecting the Unexpected

So, with very few hard rules to follow, should we expect Xi Jinping to stick to the patterns of recent party congresses, or are we more likely to see him take a disruptive approach? Although it is impossible to know for sure what the ultimate outcome will be, some important signals already have been sent, and an analysis of recent political trends suggests that, as has been the case since Xi arrived on the scene as top leader, observers should learn to expect the unexpected. In fact, it seems fair to argue that there has been entirely too much complacency in the China-watching community when it comes to thinking about the prospects for the 19th Party Congress.

A recent manifestation of this phenomenon was the breathless media coverage and expert commentary surrounding last month’s dethroning of Politburo member and Chongqing CCP Secretary Sun Zhengcai, with the general tone expressing shock that Sun, once marked as a possible future top leader, is instead under investigation for “suspected serious violations of party discipline”—regime code for corruption. Implicit in such treatments is the underlying analytic assumption that Sun should have been heading for higher office—perhaps the PBSC—as the “norms” of signaling the succession and stepwise promotion to higher office would dictate. But, of course, it should have been clear from day one that Xi would never allow Sun’s rise, and the same almost certainly holds true for Sun’s fellow Politburo member and onetime-next-generation-leadership contender Hu Chunhua. Only the precise circumstances and the severity of Sun’s political collapse—being humiliatingly purged for crimes rather than simply serving out his time in a relatively meaningless Politburo post—should have come as a surprise.

With the benefit of hindsight, the handwriting had been on the wall for Sun’s demise as early as February, when he was warned by senior CCP graft busters inspecting his city that Chongqing had not done enough to rid itself of the “toxic” influence of Bo Xilai. Likewise, Hu Chunhua’s almost shamelessly fawning speech in May to the delegates attending the local party congress in the province he administers, Guangdong, certainly carried an air of “thou doth protest too much.” It was as if declaring his unswerving loyalty to the leadership, and to Xi personally—he mentioned the party chief’s name 26 times—could somehow erase Hu’s close association with the now virtually politically bereft Communist Youth League. Still, in the moment, such indicators could reasonably be dismissed as just more tiles in the oftentimes indecipherable mosaic of Chinese elite politics.

Except, of course, for the fact that to promote Sun and/or Hu to the PBSC at the 19th Party Congress would be to risk signaling that perhaps Xi is not China’s uncontested paramount leader. With such a

turn of events, it does not require much imagination to envision the numerous headlines that would appear in foreign analyses trumpeting that Xi could not defy the constraints of collective leadership, or that the unseen hand of rival factions had thwarted his ambitions. Perhaps, in the end, this is what will be written after the Congress has concluded. It seems far more likely, however, that this is something the CCP's newly minted "core" simply will not abide. At almost every turn in his initial stint as party boss, Xi has sought to demonstrate his supremacy by accomplishing things much earlier in his tenure than his immediate predecessors did, or by achieving milestones that simply eluded them entirely. Indeed, the notion of Xi's determination to defy the Party's recent conventions to demonstrate his unrivaled leadership position likely has substantial explanatory power when assessing which of these "norms" he is most likely to violate.

## Seek Truth from Facts

Handicapping the precise outcomes of a party congress can often feel like a fool's errand given the lack of transparency in China's political system and the fact that, at each party congress, who gets what post is only one (if a very important one) of the pieces on the chessboard. Still, there are enough bits of information to make a judgment call on how Xi likely will approach at least some of the key decisions—or, for convenient shorthand, "normative tripwires"—considering the above line of argumentation. As such, below we will discuss each of the major normative tripwires in descending order of the level of confidence that Xi will cross the political Rubicon and break with the convention.

*"Guiding Ideology."* In keeping with Xi's track record of seeking to outdo his predecessors, there is abundant evidence that Xi is not satisfied with the idea of valedictory laureates when it comes to having his contribution to the CCP's ideological canon enshrined in the Party Constitution as the Party's "guiding ideology." The public campaign kicked off in June when the social media account of the overseas edition of the CCP's official mouthpiece *People's Daily* revealed that CCP General Office Director Li Zhanshu had announced in a February internal speech that President Xi's political philosophy was "basically complete." A chorus of increasingly boisterous paeans to Xi's political wisdom and his surmounting of difficult circumstances in his early life have dominated the headlines of official media in recent weeks, culminating in a major speech by Xi to all central and local leaders listing, among the other accomplishments of his first term, his major theoretical achievements. Although the moniker for Xi's political thinking has not yet been made public, it seems clear that he wants his name to be attached to it in the constitution, an honor denied to both Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin. Watch as well for the possibility that Xi's official status will be elevated beyond "core" to perhaps something along the lines of "supreme leader," "supreme commander," or even a revival of the Mao-era party chairmanship.

*Stepwise Promotions.* Xi in the last few months also has made clear that he has no interest in following the previous practice of only advancing cadres to senior leadership positions after they have steadily—or even painstakingly—and competently risen through the appropriate order of more junior posts to merit promotion. The most prominent examples of Xi's impatience are the promotions of two of his trusted allies to provincial-level party secretaryships that traditionally guarantee their incumbents a seat on the Politburo. If that precedent holds, new Beijing CCP Secretary Cai Qi will

have jumped two administrative ranks in less than five years, or less than half the time it would take if following the “norms.” Similarly, Xi acolyte Chen Min’er has succeeded Sun Zhengcai in Chongqing, capping off an equally dramatic rise. But one should not assume that this means Xi is done. He reportedly has spoken admiringly in internal remarks of Deng Xiaoping’s campaign in the mid-1980s to identify “young Turks” in the Party who will shake things up and inject some dynamism into the leadership’s top ranks. If the Deng precedent is indeed Xi’s template, watch for more surprise promotions to the CCP Secretariat as an indicator of future rising stars.

*“Seven Up, Eight Down.”* This normative tripwire has perhaps drawn the most interest and discussion as to whether Xi will abandon a practice that, as noted above, has now been faithfully adhered to at the last three party congresses. The possibility that current PBSC member and antigraft watchdog Wang Qishan may be the first beneficiary—to include his possible elevation to premier—of any break with this practice has only intensified the frenzy of speculation. But it seems that the uncertainty surrounding this norm largely is unwarranted, given that the Party sent an unambiguous signal last fall that it is not a binding constraint on the leadership’s freedom of action. In a press availability in the wake of the Sixth Plenum in late October—the same plenum that ratified Xi’s designation as the “core”—a senior official from the CCP’s Policy Research Office, the Politburo’s official think tank, dismissed as “folklore” the idea that there is a binding rule on age, describing such conventions as “party practices that can sometimes be adjusted as needed.” Although some commentators posited that this should merely be viewed as a “trial balloon,” such a notion is at odds with the logic of the Chinese political system. In short, in a top-down, Leninist system like the CCP, it is simply impossible to envision an official using such pointed language unless his comments reflected a decision of the senior leadership. So, there is little doubt that this norm can be violated. Whether Xi will choose to do so or not depends on his broader calculus of the relative weight of the other elements of his political program he wishes to see through at the Congress. Still, doing so would be a powerful way to demonstrate that he is not constrained by the practices that predated his arrival as top leader.

*Signaling the Succession.* Here the assessment becomes more speculative. Unlike the previous examples, there have been no positive observable facts to suggest what Xi’s intentions are. Sun Zhengcai’s ouster makes clear that Xi will not honor any preexisting understandings on the subject, but, as noted above, a careful study of Xi’s behavior thus far makes clear that this was never on the cards to begin with. Moreover, the logic of Xi’s desire to amass uncontested power would seem to mitigate against signaling the succession at the Party Congress. Taking a page from Chairman Mao’s political playbook, Xi has developed a masterful sense of political stagecraft, keeping his rivals consistently off-balance. Such strategic uncertainty has helped him move his agenda forward (if in fits and starts in several areas), and we can expect him to want to maintain that sense of ambiguity going forward. Moreover, sparing himself the headaches of training up (or, as Deng Xiaoping discovered, having to purge) any putative successor would increase Xi’s bandwidth for dealing with the very real threats in the economy to the country’s continued prosperity. Along similar lines, the oft-repeated meme that failing to clarify the succession would signal political uncertainty—or perhaps even instability—largely is a red herring. The leadership could telegraph stability and predictability with other leadership appointments (retaining Wang Qishan, for example) that would reassure foreign governments and market players.

*Configuration of the PBSC.* The debate over whether the PBSC will be further reduced in size—perhaps to just five members—at the Party Congress may largely turn on whether Xi is feeling magnanimous or not. As a jumping-off point, the facts are that the PBSC *can* be slimmed down, despite the oft-cited argument that the necessary portfolios could not be adequately managed by a five-person PBSC. For starters, similar arguments were made about the previous nine-member configuration before it was trimmed to seven at the 18th Party Congress. Although a five-member lineup would make the chore more difficult, some creative rebalancing could potentially make it feasible. For example, the current portfolio held by ideological czar Liu Yunshan could be folded into a catchall “party affairs” billet that broadly would oversee the activities of the Secretariat and the key party departments including organization (personnel) and propaganda. Li Zhanshu would seem a good fit for such a position, having already demonstrated an ability to manage disparate, and yet critical, functions (i.e., the CCP General Office and the office of the CCP’s National Security Commission). Similarly, the position of executive vice premier could either be eliminated or simply bucked-down to membership on the full Politburo. In recent history, this billet generally has been filled by someone from a rival leadership camp to that of the premier to ensure some degree of political balance on the PBSC, but a dominant Xi could make this unnecessary. Finally, it is possible that the position of secretary of the CCP’s Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC) could be dropped from the PBSC. The leadership’s public commitment to the creation of a new National Supervisory Commission could diminish the importance of the CDIC, and the decision to drop the roughly analogous position of secretary of the CCP Political Science and Law Commission from the PBSC at the last party congress could serve as the precedent.

So, if one stipulates that reducing the PBSC is possible, and that Xi looks poised to largely get his way in crafting the new leadership lineup, the decision on the PBSC’s size could come down to whether he wants to give some face to other leadership constituencies. Under such a scenario, maintaining a seven-man PBSC would give Xi the room to throw a bone to the likes of Hu Jintao (current Vice Premier Wang Yang) and/or Jiang Zemin (current Shanghai CCP Secretary Han Zheng). On the other hand, the attraction of a five-member configuration is that it obviates the issue of signaling the succession by ensuring there just are not enough seats at the table.

*Ten Years and Out.* Whether Xi might seek a third five-year term as CCP General Secretary is far too speculative—and distant—to predict with any accuracy at this juncture. What is certain is that, if Xi does not signal the succession at the Party Congress, outside observers will automatically conclude that this means he wishes to stay on—perhaps indefinitely—with comparisons to Russian President Vladimir Putin likely to abound. But such a conclusion would disregard what seems to be a critical element of Xi’s political makeup. If his goal is to demonstrate his superiority to his predecessors, vainly withholding passing the baton of party chief to a successor would seem incongruous with that ambition. For example, Jiang Zemin’s decision to cling to the chairmanship of the CCP Central Military Commission in 2002 stoked extreme animus toward him among important leadership constituencies. No, for Xi, emulating—or perhaps surpassing—Deng Xiaoping’s feat of wielding ultimate power while only holding a nominal formal position (honorary chairman of the bridge association) seems an ambition more befitting of his princeling pedigree.

## What Could Go Wrong?

So, what (or who) could prove to be the skunk at Xi's garden party? The usual suspects include a domestic or foreign crisis that leaves the top leader vulnerable to criticism from his rivals that he is not measuring up. In a party congress year, such attacks may have much more to do with personnel horse-trading than with the substance of the issue at hand. The Beidaihe retreat often has provided the platform for sharp criticism of a sitting leader's performance on a range of issues, but Xi looks more likely to face fairly calm waters at the seashore. The informal atmosphere of the Beidaihe conclave traditionally has favored retired senior leaders by providing an opportunity for them to attend key policy meetings and to air their views. But Xi has taken much of the wind out of the party elders' sails with his relentless crusade against political interference by retired leaders. As if to underscore the point, Xi's recent solo inspection of crack military units on the eve of the PLA's 90th birthday stood in stark contrast to previous reviews where the retired commander(s)-in-chief also were present.

Xi also seems to be largely safe on the policy front. At home, his crackdown on malfeasance and risky behavior in China's financial sector has shown a vigor and determination unseen in past efforts, allowing him to claim that he is focused on shoring up China's economic stability. Official media in recent days also have touted China's success in largely taming capital outflows, cauterizing (if only in the near term) a major worry among Chinese and foreign market players of a possible financial contagion. Abroad, Xi seems to have deftly managed challenges that would easily have put his predecessors on the hot seat. Most prominently, Xi's confident response to President Trump's telephone call with the Taiwan president, Tsai Ing-wen, suggested a leader firmly in charge of regime constituencies, such as the PLA, that had bedeviled his forerunners in similar circumstances. Xi also seems to have adroitly handled the rising tensions with Washington over the North Korean nuclear program, though it is fair so say that U.S. pressure seemed to play an important role in moving China off the sidelines on the latest round of United Nations sanctions.

Several commentators separately have suggested that the most dangerous wild card for Xi Jinping is Guo Wengui, the fugitive billionaire frequently tweeting from his New York penthouse claims of bad behavior by senior Chinese leaders, most notably Wang Qishan. Although Western media have credited Guo with some important revelations, his credibility has been hurt by his recent mixing of unsubstantiated rumor into his daily Twitter storms. More importantly, it is unclear if Guo's claims have had (or will have) any material impact on his main target, Wang. In fact, when Guo's fusillade coincided with a lengthy absence by Wang from public view, many analysts speculated that Wang's disappearing act meant that he was under a cloud because of Guo's allegations. When Sun Zhengcai was ousted from his post in Chongqing and subsequently confirmed to be under CDIC investigation, however, it became clear that Wang's absence was due to his management of this critical corruption case. As if to underscore the point, Wang concomitantly penned a lengthy article in *People's Daily*, underscoring his rock-solid political standing.

Moreover, Guo's behavior fits a pattern seen in the run-up to previous party congresses where a mysterious individual claiming access to party secrets arrives on the scene just as the politicking in

Beijing reaches a fever pitch. For example, in 2002, a pseudonymous author, Zong Hairen, compiled a book, *Disidai* (the Fourth Generation), supposedly based on confidential files compiled by the CCP Organization Department, the Party's personnel arm. Zong Hairen's predictions for the new leadership lineup to be announced at the 16th Party Congress, which were predicated on the reputed Organization Department materials, were then published in English by two American China specialists. Unfortunately, however, the predictions proved completely inaccurate. Which seems to highlight an axiom of Chinese politics—the grouping that leaks to the outside generally is losing the internal fight, because, if you are winning the political battle in a closed system, there is no need to leak. Guo Wengui claims that he will reveal even more damaging information in the run-up to the Party Congress, which he may well do. But, whether he is acting at the direction of a leadership constituency or is simply trying to aid their cause because he has an axe to grind, his impact to date appears to have been minimal.

## Does It Really Matter?

What, then, are the likely political and policy implications if Xi Jinping disregards some—or all—of the normative tripwires described above? The potential negative consequences have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere, but they include, in this view, the risk of Xi forming a dangerous personality cult by leaving the succession in doubt, using the canonization of his theoretical teachings to boost his leadership standing to Mao-like heights, and promoting young, inexperienced yes-men at the expense of seasoned technocrats. Flouting the Party's conventions on age restrictions for joining the Politburo and on limiting a top leader's tenure to two five-year terms could promote policy sclerosis at the top as aging leaders struggle to keep up with the demands of China's increasingly dynamic society. Dumping these same two norms also could produce sharper leadership infighting as ambitious officials lose confidence that there is a predictable route to the top of the party hierarchy. And, of course, shrinking the size of the PBSC increases the likelihood of bureaucratic overstretch for a stovepiped Leninist system that is already struggling to keep pace with the demands of a rising global power.

But are there any positive outcomes that could be associated with leaving these conventions behind? One set of potentially positive outcomes can be characterized under the general heading of "focus." Kicking the succession can down the road and ticking the ideological canonization box early for Xi could eliminate two nettlesome distractions that have plagued the latter tenures of his predecessors. Xi's first term already has demonstrated at times the limitations of his personal bandwidth when it comes to getting difficult things done, so taking a few bits off his plate could be helpful in this regard. Likewise, shrinking the size of the PBSC could promote more efficiency in that body's deliberations that in turn produce more decisive outcomes. Of course, some analysts would argue that these same benefits could be better attained by sticking to the "norms" and turning back the clock to the pre-Xi era, especially if the leadership "returned" to the path of political institutionalization and modernization. But such thinking seems more like a flight of fancy given Xi's strong hand. Short of his death or a putsch that removes him as top leader, the direction of travel will remain toward greater centralization and personalization of political power.

A second potential dividend is the prospect of better implementation of policy decisions across the bureaucracy, a scourge of Chinese politics in the modern era. Elevating Xi to ideological arbiter status in the party this early in his tenure could smooth implementation by substantially raising the political stakes of opposing him. We already have witnessed some hints of this following Xi's elevation to "core" leader status. It was not by coincidence, for example, that several government ministers perceived to be at odds with Xi's agenda were retired only a few days after the close of the Sixth Plenum. Granting Xi ideological supremacy would further boost his ability to compel compliance in that resisters would no longer be challenging Xi as an individual, but instead would be at odds with the party's "line," risking allegations of fomenting a "two-line struggle," one of the most serious charges in the CCP's political lexicon.

Similarly, breaking with stepwise promotions and advancing a cadre of talented young officials personally loyal to Xi may also promote smoother policy implementation. One of the chief critiques of the Hu Jintao administration was that the leadership was so riven by divided loyalties that nothing could ever be accomplished. In fact, it is generally recognized that Xi was handed the reins of the party in part because its top powerbrokers judged he stood the best chance of tackling this problem. The recent deleveraging effort in the financial sector could offer a microcosm of what this could look like. It is broadly accepted that reshuffling the leaders at the helms of the key oversight agencies—the China Banking, Securities, and Insurance Regulatory Commissions—has been critical to the success of the campaign to better control risk. Xi no doubt hopes to replicate this success to break other troubling policy logjams in a variety of other institutions across the party and state bureaucracies.

And, finally, there are the potential benefits of doing away with the conventions on age restrictions, with the possible retention of Wang Qishan being the best (and truly the only) prospect. Many Chinese interlocutors regularly bemoan that for China to surmount challenges like escaping the middle-income trap and tackling the mounting pile of debt choking the economy, the country "needs another Zhu Rongji," the former premier who took on the state-owned behemoths and oversaw China's entry into the World Trade Organization. The reality is that only Wang Qishan, a Zhu protege, has the requisite experience and political toughness to take on the task of taming the challenges that risk destroying China's economic vitality. His deep experience and corresponding policy farsightedness in the financial sector dwarfs that of Premier Li Keqiang, and this is the area where the country needs the most help. Although retaining Wang would mark something of a setback for the country's efforts to continually rejuvenate the top ranks of the CCP, in this case, the tradeoff of maintaining a particularly skilled set of hands to oversee the dramatic change required to surmount the problems threatening China's future prosperity seems worth the risk.

Of course, all of this discussion of potential benefits ultimately rests upon the critical issue of what kind of future China Xi himself envisions. Here we have very few clues. The track record of the last five years gives little indication that even a more powerful Xi would be willing to alter the trends of political illiberalism and assertiveness on the world stage that have roiled many in the West and in the democratic polities in Asia. So a key question to be answered during the balance of Xi's tenure is whether he is truly committed to fleshing out the reform vision statement approved at the 2013 Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee, even if such a package does not conform with the desired

end state the world's liberal economies might like to see. And, if that instinct is there, will it be sufficient to put China solidly on the path toward realizing Xi's clarion call for achieving the "China Dream" and "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

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