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5 THINGS TO WATCH AT THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY CONFERENCE

This coming autumn - the precise timing is presently unknown - delegates of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will gather in Beijing. The purpose of the 19th National Congress of the CCP will be to choose the party's leadership for the next five years. Who leads this massive organisation – over 80 million strong – clearly matters. Indeed, by some estimates the People's Republic of China (PRC) has already overtaken the US as the world's largest economy (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-30483762>). So, what should we look out for?

Xi Jinping & the structure of Chinese Politics.

Since becoming the party's General Secretary in 2012 (and therefore President of the PRC), Xi has consolidated his position. At the heart of this has been the anti-corruption drive. To Xi's supporters, this represents the General Secretary's earnest desire to rid the party of impure elements that undermine the party's legitimacy. In contrast, critics charge that this drive is a front to remove opponents and to consolidate Xi's power (https://www.amazon.co.uk/Chinese-Politics-Era-Jinping-Retrogression/dp/0765642093/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1503304663&sr=8-2&keywords=chinese+politics+in+the+era+of+xi+jinping).

Whatever the truth, it is virtually certain (barring illness) that Xi will be returned as General Secretary for another five years. Equally, he will surely retain his chairmanship of the Central Military Commission – thereby exercising significant influence over the armed forces. But rumours circulate that the incumbent intends to extend his influence beyond five years (<https://qz.com/1030850/all-the-signs-that-chinas-xi-jinping-is-planning-on-a-third-term/>). If so, this represents a significant departure from the gradual institutionalisation of Chinese politics. Indeed, since the 1990s CCP General Secretaries have generally served only two terms. If Xi tries to prolong his influence, this may indicate a return to more personalised politics.

Internal Politics: Age & Double Standards?

Even if Xi 'Da Da' ('Father/Uncle Xi') emerges with enhanced prestige following the 19th Congress, a *complete* return to the Maoist personality cult depicted in propaganda posters of the 1960s and 1970s seems unlikely. The Chinese Communist Party is not monolithic, and is comprised of different factions: the Shanghai gang, the Communist Youth League, Princelings, and so forth. To make matters more complicated, there is also overlap between these groups (https://www.amazon.co.uk/d/Books/New-Emperors-Power-Princelings-China-Kerry-Brown/1780769105/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1502808664&sr=1-

[28&keywords=kerry+brown](#)). Nevertheless, the National Congress – and hence the election of CCP officers - will indicate which groups are ascendant or in retreat.

Who serves on the Standing Committee (akin to the UK Cabinet) also matters. It is widely expected that because most of the current Standing Committee are aged in their later-60s, there will be a high turnover of its membership this autumn. Indeed, recent convention suggests that if candidates are over 68 they will be retired (<https://www.economist.com/news/china/21713913-reading-runes-will-be-even-more-difficult-usual-xi-jinping-busy-arranging-huge>). This age restriction does not apply to Xi or Chinese 'prime minister' Li Keqiang – both are in their earlier-60s (and both serve on the Standing Committee). However, there are suggestions that Xi's anti-corruption manager, Wang Qishan, may stay on – even though he is 68. If Wang continues on the Standing Committee, this would symbolise Xi's power (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/02/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-retirement-rules.html>).

The Power of Former Leaders

Another telling development will be the ability of former presidents to anoint future presidents. Indeed, China's 'paramount leader' during the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping, helped ensure that Hu succeeded Jiang. Moreover, Jiang was instrumental in Xi's rise to power after Hu (<http://nationalpost.com/news/xi-jinping-assumes-leadership-of-china-in-once-in-a-decade-political-transition>). Given this precedent, one might expect Hu to secure the promotion of one of his protégés to the Standing Committee later this year - in the hope that this candidate will succeed Xi in 2022. But it remains to be seen if Hu has sufficient clout.

The future of Chinese domestic policy.

On a recent visit to China I was struck by the pace of change, including high speed trains and the purchasing of goods by mobile phones (not cash). Yet for all these technological developments, there are significant challenges for China: rural poverty, environmental degradation, and the economic turbulence generated by the 'new normal' (China is now transitioning from export-led economic growth to consumer-driven growth). The Xi-Li administration has sought to tackle these problems as part of the 'Chinese Dream' - or national 'rejuvenation'. Here the CCP and Chinese people aspire to attain a 'moderately prosperous society' (https://www.amazon.co.uk/Governance-China-Xi-Jinping/dp/1602204098/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1502885483&sr=8-2&keywords=xi+jinping). We will see this autumn how far the party judges the Chinese Dream to have been realised, as well as any potential plans for the future – including new infrastructure projects and deregulation.

Foreign Policy & North Korea

Equally, we may gain clues into China's foreign policy for the next five years. Recently, China's neighbours have been unnerved by territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and by the steady advancement of the PRC's military (<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/28/asia/china-navy-new-destroyer/index.html>). Again, the shuffling of personnel and speeches at the National Congress may indicate where the PRC sees itself going. Will it become a regional or global power? Will China be an economic, military or diplomatic player? A potential test case is the current standoff between the USA and North Korea. Nobody knows how this situation will develop - in late-August North Korea fired a missile over Japan (<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/28/politics/north-korea-launch-unidentified-projectile/index.html>). But given the close proximity of the Korean peninsula to China, one can bet that Beijing will be monitoring the situation closely. One thing is for sure, China's leaders will have a full in-tray after the 19th National Congress.