

SPECIAL REPORT

No. 254 | MARCH 7, 2022

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ASIAN STUDIES CENTER

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# Looking Ahead to China's 20th Party Congress

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**T**he Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is gearing up for its most important political event of the decade. Sometime in the second half of 2022, China's most senior leaders will assemble at Beijing's Great Hall of the People for the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Maneuvering ahead of the event will dominate political life in China throughout 2022, and the outcomes of the congress will determine the country's trajectory for years to come. This report will present an overview of what to expect at the upcoming Party Congress and provide readers with a greater understanding of the complexity of Chinese elite politics and the constraints facing Chinese leader Xi Jinping. While it will not attempt to predict precise results, it will present some of the most likely high-level outcomes and their related policy implications.

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This report will present an overview of what to expect at the upcoming Party Congress and provide readers with a greater appreciation of the complexity of Chinese elite politics and the constraints facing Chinese leader Xi Jinping. While it will not attempt to predict precise results, it will present a few of the most likely high-level outcomes and their related policy implications.

## What Is a Party Congress?

The CCP has held a national congress every five years since 1977. These twice-a-decade gatherings are the Party's main platform for presenting top-line policy priorities and announcing senior leadership appointments, making them the most important events in China's political calendar. This year's Party Congress will be the 20th such gathering since the CCP's founding in 1921.

Party Congresses are tightly scripted events. Every decision, statement, and personnel appointment is decided ahead of time following extensive closed-door negotiations.<sup>1</sup>

Party Congresses are high-stakes events for Chinese officials, who spend years working to secure advancement for themselves and their close associates while seeking to discredit and, if possible, eliminate their factional rivals within the Party. While this jockeying occurs behind the scenes, its effects on officials' behavior often come to the surface as the Party Congress approaches, sometimes resulting in major policy shifts or official scandals. These dynamics were on display in Bo Xilai's sacking and subsequent arrest in 2012 and, less dramatically, that of his ally, Chongqing Party Secretary Sun Zhengcai—who was widely viewed as a possible successor to Xi—in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Both of these purges happened mere months before a Party Congress.

## Why the 20th Party Congress Is So Important

The 20th Party Congress was always expected to be consequential. Based on informal CCP protocols developed in recent decades to remove much of the uncertainty and volatility associated with leadership transitions, Xi was supposed to step down at the end of this year's gathering, having completed his two terms in office and exceeded the retirement age of 68. A new generation of leadership was to be appointed in his place, which would set the stage for future evolution of Party governance.

Yet, as the 20th Party Congress approaches, it is increasingly likely to go down in history for the opposite reason. The 19th Party Congress (held in 2017) tipped off what was in store for the nation's leadership when it failed to appoint a successor for Xi. Both Xi and his immediate predecessor, Hu Jintao, had been appointed to the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC)—China's top decision-making body—and designated heirs-apparent at least one term prior to assuming the top position, and such a grooming period was generally accepted as one of the unwritten succession norms.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Xi's status at the core of the Party deepened, with “Xi Jinping

Thought” added to the Party charter and China’s constitution. In addition, a constitutional amendment in 2018 eliminated term limits for the president of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), a position also held by Xi. Now, less than a year before the end of his second term, Xi shows no intention of stepping down. If he gets his way, this year’s Party Congress will not just be consequential; it will be game-changing.

However, this outcome is not guaranteed. Contrary to popular notions of Xi as an all-powerful autocrat, he is not the only person who matters in China’s political system. Xi derives his power from the consent of the broader CCP leadership, which, like previous leaders, he must earn through a mixture of performance, maneuvering, and compromise. So far, he has had remarkable success in building consensus around his policy platform as well as in placing his allies in key leadership posts. However, his second term has been marked by a series of crises, the most severe being the deterioration of China’s relationships with the United States and other Western countries and the outbreak and initial coverup of the coronavirus pandemic. The former has undermined Beijing’s long-standing efforts to present its rise as non-threatening, leading many of the world’s most influential countries to actively oppose it on the international stage and limit its access to technologies that are key to its industrial and military development objectives. The latter sparked intense, albeit short-lived, public discord that risked undermining the Party’s confidence in his leadership.<sup>4</sup> Xi appears to have successfully turned these crises into personal victories at home, but it is unclear whether Party elders were as easily convinced as the Chinese public was.

Xi is a controversial figure within the CCP. Many members of China’s political and economic elite view the norms governing leadership transition as essential for China’s continued stability and see Xi’s political centralization and governance style as detrimental to both the CCP’s and China’s survival.<sup>5</sup> The people with these concerns face an uphill battle; many of the most influential among them have been either sidelined or imprisoned, victims of Xi’s anti-corruption campaign, which has served to fell his political adversaries along with prosecuting truly corrupt officials. The fear of following in their footsteps prevents most other people of consequence in the Party from organizing in opposition to his proposals.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the CCP’s public veneer of unity, the Party is divided by loosely defined factions characterized largely by personal connections. The porous, informal nature of China’s factional politics often makes it hard to discern such affiliations; the CCP bans formal factions, and leaders do not announce their factional ties, leaving it up to analysts to figure out alliances based on

the career progressions of senior personnel.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, while making a point to appear unified in public, behind closed doors, the different factions are often mutually antagonistic due to their competition for leadership positions and, to an extent, differing policy preferences. Moreover, these relationship networks also undergird financial and other ties, so there are personal as well as policy interests at stake.

After rising to the head of the CCP in part because he did not clearly belong to any of the warring factions at the time of his nomination, Xi has spent the past nine years stacking the Party leadership with people with whom he shares previous personal and professional ties (referred to below as “proteges,” “allies,” or members of his “inner circle”).<sup>8</sup> Most of these are people who worked under him in Zhejiang or Fujian Provinces, which he previously led as Party Secretary, or are from his home province of Shaanxi. There are still others with whom he has even more intimate ties, such as his childhood friends Vice Premier Liu He and Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia.<sup>9</sup> After orchestrating the promotion of these allies into key Party leadership posts, Xi now leads what has quickly become the CCP’s most influential faction. Yet he does not control the entire political chessboard.

Of the current seven members of the PSC, only three (Xi himself, National People’s Congress [NPC] Standing Committee Chairman Li Zhanshu, and Central Commission of Discipline Inspection head Zhao Leji) are known to belong to his inner circle. Two others—Premier Li Keqiang and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) head Wang Yang—are proteges of his immediate predecessor Hu Jintao. The sixth, First Secretary of the CCP Central Secretariat Wang Huning, has served as a senior adviser to every top leader since Hu Jintao’s predecessor Jiang Zemin and is not believed to have a factional affiliation. The final member, First Vice Premier Han Zheng, despite having worked under Xi briefly in Shanghai in 2007, is believed by some to belong to Jiang Zemin’s “Shanghai Clique,” while others consider him unaffiliated.<sup>10</sup>

Xi’s hold on the Party is more evident when the entire 25-member Politburo is taken into account. Xi is believed to have firm ties to 15 members of that body, suggesting a majority.<sup>11</sup> Given the imprecise definitions of political factions in China and the incentives that many outside Xi’s inner circle have to align with him for both self-preservation and career advancement, Xi’s position ahead of the 20th Party Congress is likely stronger than it appears on paper.

How these intra-Party dynamics play out over the next several months will decide what happens at the Party Congress. That, in turn, will in large

part determine the trajectory China follows not just for the next five years but for the foreseeable future. In particular, the outcomes of the Party Congress will help answer three important questions.

First, *the 20th Party Congress will determine who leads China for the next five to 10 years and possibly even longer.* Most of the attention will rightly center on whether Xi secures a third term as Party general secretary. The Party Congress will also reveal who will succeed Li Keqiang as premier—the country’s second highest office—as well as who will be appointed to the CCP’s other central bodies. Informal retirement norms indicate that two of the six PSC members besides Xi are slated to step down because of age. Li Keqiang is constitutionally barred from serving a third term as premier but is eligible for another term on the PSC. He may retire rather than move to a lower-ranking position in that body. Eight of the other 18 Politburo members will also likely retire. The people replacing them will enter China’s most senior leadership councils and have a direct impact on policy.

Strictly speaking, the Central Committee members will be appointed during the Party Congress, and the Politburo and PSC appointments will be made immediately following the Party Congress—probably the day after it ends—at the First Plenary Session of the 20th CCP Central Committee. Given that these appointments are the most anticipated announcement in the week or so surrounding the Party Congress, most reporting considers them part of the Party Congress for all intents and purposes. For the sake of simplicity, this report follows the general practice of not differentiating between the two meetings.

Second, *the 20th Party Congress will reveal how powerful Xi is.* The clearest indicator of Xi’s power, besides his ability to stay in office, will be the composition of key central bodies, primarily the Politburo and the PSC, both of which are expected to have considerable turnover due to retirement norms. This will also determine his power following the Party Congress: If he manages to place allies in the majority of PSC seats, then there will be few checks on his power. Additional clues about Xi’s standing will be seen in any changes to Party institutions or significant breaches of Party custom. Some examples would include a key member of Xi’s inner circle not stepping down in accordance with retirement norms or Xi getting a new title, such as Mao Zedong’s former title of Party chairman.

Finally, *the 20th Party Congress will outline the policy trajectory China will follow for the next five years.* During the congress, Xi will deliver the CCP work report, which will present the Party’s key policy priorities. The work report will be the most authoritative statement of the Party’s priorities through 2027, but it and other statements coming out of the Party Congress

will consist only of broad guidelines. The details will be developed in the months and years following the congress by government bodies such as the NPC, the State Council, and various ministries, which are led by senior Party officials.

## Likely Outcomes

With several months remaining between now and the 20th Party Congress, an attempt to predict precise outcomes would be premature. Even Party insiders have a poor track record when it comes to projecting personnel changes.

However, there is much that can be said about the Party Congress without veering too far into the hypothetical. Of this, the most important point is that, barring any major unforeseen development, Xi Jinping will probably emerge from this event more powerful than ever. The extent of his power, how he chooses to wield it, and how exactly it translates into policy are less certain and are the subject of the remainder of this report.

### **Xi Will Remain China's Undisputed Leader and Most Likely Retain All Formal Posts**

Xi Jinping is likely to remain China's undisputed leader for the foreseeable future. Since the last Party Congress, he has strengthened his already unprecedented consolidation of power by appointing allies to key leadership posts and using anti-corruption enforcement to remove or constrain factional rivals. He has also proliferated the study of Xi Jinping Thought everywhere, from government and state-owned enterprise offices to elementary schools.<sup>12</sup> All the while, he has made no effort to bolster the leadership credentials of any potential successor.

Xi's apparent desire to stay in office indefinitely is likely rooted in more than simple ambition. Xi faces the additional challenge that those who have lost power and standing due to his political purges and anti-corruption campaigns—or their associates, some of whom continue to occupy senior positions—may seek revenge if he leaves his position of authority.<sup>13</sup> While the newly adopted historical resolution that codifies Xi's elevated status in the Party will provide him a high degree of protection by tying his legitimacy to that of the CCP, this is still a risk Xi is not eager to take.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, a desire to hold onto power means little without the acquiescence of the other Party elite, but he appears to have that as well. Despite credible reports of widespread opposition to Xi within the Party, there have

been no signs of any serious pushback against his continuing consolidation of power. To the contrary, the bulk of the Party leadership appear to be falling in line behind him, whether willingly or begrudgingly. One former CCP insider, after her defection to the United States, reported that many in the Central Committee opposed Xi's decision to scrap presidential term limits, but when he forced the decision through during a plenary session in 2018, no one dared speak out.<sup>15</sup> Party officials do not appear any more willing to formally oppose Xi's wishes today than they were in 2018.

The likelihood of serious opposition to Xi has progressively decreased through the course of his rule, and his apparent factional majority in the 19th Politburo makes any attempt to force him to step down in accordance with Party norms unlikely to succeed if he is as determined to hold onto power as he appears. Admittedly, it is more difficult to assess the factional makeup of the much larger CCP Central Committee—currently consisting of 205 full members and 171 alternate members who attend meetings but lack the voting rights of full members. It is the Central Committee that nominally selects the leadership and formulates policy, and given that many members of that body are less prominent than those in the Politburo, information on their political connections is often incomplete.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the Central Committee's role is mainly a formality. The important decisions are made in behind-the-scenes negotiations involving the Politburo, the PSC, and a select group of influential Party elders. As the reported dynamics around the 2018 constitutional amendment mentioned above illustrate, the Central Committee is expected to approve the decisions that have been made.

The developments of the past four years appear to confirm this assessment. The clearest indication that Xi is not going to step down is that, less than a year before the 20th Party Congress is expected to convene, no likely successor has emerged. Xi broke custom in 2017 by managing to preclude an heir-apparent from being appointed to the PSC, and no new personnel moves have been made since then that would indicate a successor has been chosen. Xi's only firm ally in the PSC who is not set to retire, Zhao Leji—currently the head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (the CCP's top disciplinary and anti-corruption body)—has not held any of the positions indicative of grooming for the top job. Although there is no rule indicating which positions the heir-apparent should hold to prepare him for the top post, both Xi and Hu before him—the only two Chinese top leaders who have come to power through a relatively institutionalized leadership transition—were made vice president and vice chairman of the CMC at some point during the term before they took the top job.

Despite these indications that Xi will remain at the CCP's helm after the Party Congress, some analysts continue to raise the possibility that Xi might retire from his formal leadership roles but continue to direct the Party from behind the scenes.<sup>17</sup> Proponents of this view point to Deng Xiaoping as the model. Deng ruled China from 1978 until his death in 1997. During this time, he never served as general secretary, and after his 1989 retirement, he no longer had any formal Party role.<sup>18</sup> Deng justified his informal leadership partly on the grounds that he needed to continue guiding the Party through the period of reform and opening that he had inaugurated, which draws some parallels with Xi and his "new era" narrative.<sup>19</sup>

However, any attempt by Xi to direct the Party without formal leadership roles would be much easier said than done. First, Xi is not Deng. Despite Xi's status as the son of a revolutionary family and the rapid progress he has made in enshrining his ideology in Party orthodoxy, he lacks Deng's status as a revolutionary leader and comrade-in-arms of Mao Zedong who had been with the Party since before the PRC's founding and stood by his comrades despite suffering multiple purges during the tumultuous political campaigns that characterized the Mao era.<sup>20</sup> Simply stated, Xi lacks the sense of moral authority that Deng appeared to have as one of the last remaining first-generation CCP leaders.

Second, and more importantly, for much of Deng's tenure, it is hard to make the argument that he truly ruled from behind the scenes. Deng is generally considered to have been China's paramount leader from 1978 until his death in 1997, though some place the end of his leadership at his last public appearance in 1994.<sup>21</sup> While he was not the Party's *de jure* leader during this time, he sat on the PSC between 1977 and 1987. He also held the position of CMC chairman from 1981 until his formal retirement in 1989. The CMC chairman heads the People's Liberation Army, China's military, which is an organ of the Party rather than the state. In a system lacking formal succession rules, he who controls the military commands significant political leverage, and whenever the CMC chairman and general secretary have been two different people, the CMC chairman has almost always been the *de facto* paramount leader. Throughout the PRC's history, the only person to have ever eclipsed a CMC chairman in power was Deng himself—between 1978 and when he took the CMC reins from Hua Guofeng in 1981 and again following his 1989 retirement.

Only after Deng relinquished his role as CMC chairman in 1989 can he truly be said to have led the Party informally, and he did so for just over seven years. During most of this brief period, he played a limited role in the day-to-day decisions of the Party and faced stiff challenges from political

opponents. It is unclear how long he could have continued directing the CCP had he lived longer. Given that Xi can reasonably expect to live another 20 years or longer, there is no precedent to suggest he would even attempt to retire from his formal positions during this Party Congress in hopes of guiding the Party informally.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, Xi does not need to hold onto all of his leadership positions to preserve his personal and political interests. He could plausibly step down from some of his leadership roles and hold onto others. In such an event, the most likely scenario would be for him to try to stay on as CMC chairman and install a trusted ally in the general secretary post. Indeed, there is precedent for former leaders to attempt to hold that role after stepping down as general secretary. In addition to Deng, who never served as general secretary, Jiang Zemin held onto the CMC chairmanship for two years after handing the reins of CCP general secretary to Hu Jintao.

Yet, while this is a possible development in a future Party Congress, it does not appear to be in the cards for 2022 based on the positioning both Xi and the Party have carried out to legitimize his remaining in power beyond the standard two terms. This is most clearly evident in the state-run media discourse around the constitutional amendment scrapping presidential term limits in 2018. The media—which serve as the CCP’s official mouthpiece—defended the controversial move on the grounds that it would help preserve institutional soundness by ensuring the PRC president, CCP general secretary, and CMC chairman continue to be the same person, given that the two Party roles are not subject to formal term limits.<sup>23</sup> The emphasis placed on this norm in official sources makes it improbable that Xi will step down from one or two of these roles during this Party Congress. While the official narrative could change in the future to legitimize Xi’s remaining CMC chairman after stepping down as general secretary, propaganda organs have not made moves in this direction. Thus, the most likely scenario is that Xi will retain all three posts.

### **Xi’s Longer-Term Plans Will Likely Remain Unclear**

If Xi gets a third term at the Party’s helm as expected, it does not necessarily follow that he will remain in office for a fourth or fifth term. Xi may plan to retire once he is confident that the Party and its leadership will not deviate from the new direction he has set and no rival faction has the capability or the will to threaten his personal and political interests. Regardless of the considerations driving Xi’s longer-term plans and his ability to follow through with these plans, there have been few hints regarding how long he

intends to rule. By the end of Xi's third term in 2027, he will be 74 years old, and a fourth term would put him at 79 in 2032. Some observers believe Xi's emphasis on the year 2035 in many of the goals he has set indicates he may plan to stay for three more terms, retiring in 2037 at the age of 84.<sup>24</sup>

If Xi manages to stay in office for a third term as expected, it appears unlikely that he will willingly step down five years later. However, given how little is known about Xi's intentions, it is important to consider this possibility. If Xi plans to step down in 2027, then his anointed successor will most likely be appointed to the PSC during this Party Congress. It will probably not be immediately clear that a successor has been chosen, however, as a formal announcement would risk making Xi a lame duck or diverting influence to his successor prematurely.

Prior to 2017, it was relatively easy to predict who the next Party leader would be. General secretaries were expected to serve for two five-year terms, meaning that any successor would be appointed to the PSC with at least 15 years remaining before having to retire based on age—a rarity in a body that favors leaders close to retirement. Since Xi disregarded this norm in 2017, however, it has become much murkier.

While the Party Congress may not resolve the question of whether Xi has a successor-in-waiting, one can narrow the field of potential candidates. If Xi is powerful enough to stay in office a third term, then anyone tapped to succeed him in 2027 will almost certainly be one of his trusted protégés. Given the fact that any successor must be eligible to remain in the PSC after 2027 (assuming retirement ages continue to be respected for everyone except Xi), this will likely result in a very narrow list of possibilities. Currently, the most likely candidates appear to be current Chongqing Party Secretary Chen Min'er and CCP General Office Director Ding Xuexiang. Brief introductions of these individuals and the reasons for this assessment are provided in the appendix. In this section, it suffices to say that both of these individuals appear to be among Xi's most trusted advisers, and they both have two terms remaining before they are expected to retire. All other current Politburo members close to Xi have only one term left before their expected retirements, though Xi could hypothetically catapult a lesser-known ally directly from the Central Committee into the PSC. (Xi and his predecessor Hu both went straight from the Central Committee to the PSC.)

As Xi's third term progresses, observers will watch for any signs that one of Xi's proteges in the PSC is being groomed to replace him. Given the supreme importance of the general secretary's position, anyone being groomed to succeed Xi would most likely be placed in roles designed to prepare him for the top job. Such roles include, among others, vice chairman of

the CMC and vice president of China. Nevertheless, these roles have historically not been assigned to the successor-in-waiting until months, or even years, after the congress. At the earliest, a vice presidential appointment would be made during the NPC session in the spring of 2023. The CMC vice chairman appointment could be made years into the five-year term. Furthermore, if someone is appointed to positions associated with grooming for the top spot, it will not necessarily mean that a succession plan is in place; such appointments could merely be a contingency plan in case Xi's health declines or he is otherwise rendered unsuitable for reappointment to a fourth term in 2027.

### **The Identity of the Premier Will Be a Litmus Test for the Extent of Xi's Power**

As mentioned above, Li Keqiang is constitutionally barred from serving a third term as premier. The identity of his replacement will be a strong indicator of how powerful Xi is. While the premier is a government (rather than Party) position that is formalized during the NPC session that usually takes place the March following the Party Congress, his identity is usually evident as soon as the PSC lineup is announced.

Historical precedent shows that every premier (with the exception of the first premier, Zhou Enlai) served as vice premier before taking his post.<sup>25</sup> This puts Xi at a disadvantage. Of the existing vice premiers, the only one not expected to retire this year is Hu Chunhua, a protégé of Hu Jintao and Li Keqiang.<sup>26</sup> Xi will likely attempt every tactic available to sideline Hu, including searching for justification to purge him from the Party. Reports in March 2021 of investigations into corruption in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region going back 20 years—which includes the time Hu served in the region (2009–2012)—indicate that this plan may be in progress.<sup>27</sup> However, the fact that Hu has weathered the anti-corruption campaign up to this point despite being widely regarded as one of Xi's most formidable factional rivals indicates that these efforts may not achieve Xi's desired result.

Whether or not Xi manages to dispose of Hu, he will have to come up with a viable alternative candidate if he wants an ally as premier. He has two possible ways of doing this. First, he could try to delay the retirement of one of the other current vice premiers. Xi's preferred choice would likely be Liu He, his childhood friend and the only vice premier who belongs to his inner circle. So far, there have been no clear indications that this is being considered. Another person who could be tapped to stay on an extra term

is Han Zheng, the first vice premier and a member of the PSC. However, Han, though not generally described as an adversary of Xi, does not have the overlapping work experience with Xi that is characteristic of his inner circle, having only served under him briefly when Xi was Shanghai Party Secretary and Han was the city's mayor in 2007. If Xi breaks with precedent to keep someone on past retirement age, he will most likely do so on behalf of someone like Liu, who is believed to be among his most trusted advisers.

The second way Xi could have one of his protégés appointed as premier would be to appoint someone from outside the current group of vice premiers. To appoint someone not serving as vice premier at the time of appointment would be unprecedented. The most qualified candidate would be PSC member Wang Yang, who was a vice premier before joining the PSC in 2017 and will be only 67 when the Party Congress is held, qualifying him for one more term in Party leadership. However, the fact that Wang was not retained as first vice premier upon appointment to the PSC and was instead made head of the CPPCC indicates that such an appointment was not in the plans, given that past premiers have always been selected from among the pool of sitting vice premiers. Furthermore, Wang is himself a Hu Jintao protégé, and while Xi would likely prefer someone close to retirement over the younger Hu Chunhua, he is unlikely to break from Party precedent to appoint him.

Another way for Xi to install an ally as premier from outside the current pool of vice premiers would be to appoint one of his protégés as a vice premier before the Party Congress and groom that person to take Li's spot. This could occur at the annual NPC session in spring 2022. Alternatively, legislation passed at the March 2021 NPC session made it possible for the NPC Standing Committee—a smaller body that meets at least once every two months—to appoint and remove vice premiers.<sup>28</sup> If a key Xi ally is appointed vice premier by NPC action prior to the 20th Party Congress, this will be a strong indication that Xi wants to appoint that person as the next premier.

Any appointment or removal of a vice premier must be formally recommended by Premier Li, who would not willingly jeopardize his most promising factional ally's chance at succeeding him.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Xi has been known to use coercion to get his way, and it is not beyond the realm of possibility that he could find a way to get one of his younger protégés appointed before the Party Congress.<sup>30</sup> Xi may even push for Liu He to be transferred out of his vice premier position and replaced with a younger factional ally before the Party Congress, although this type of move would likely face stiff opposition from Li and other factional rivals.

The appointment of a Xi protégé as premier in place of someone who has been as thoroughly groomed for the office as Hu Chunhua would require a degree of power consolidation that is unprecedented in recent decades. If Xi can orchestrate such a move, then he may well be on his way to surpassing Deng in influence. Even Deng had to make compromises to placate rival factions.<sup>31</sup>

If Xi does not manage to push Hu Chunhua aside, this should not be interpreted as evidence that Xi's influence is in decline but rather as confirmation that he does not yet have the absolute power over the Party that many observers assume he has. Hu is the most promising rising leader the main opposition faction associated with Hu Jintao and Li Keqiang has, and they will likely expend immense amounts of political capital to make him China's next premier. Furthermore, media reports over the past five years have noted indications that Xi may have come to terms with the reality of Hu Chunhua's continued role in the Party.<sup>32</sup>

While Xi would surely like to choose the next premier, continuing to have a factional rival in that role would not be altogether bad for him. Xi has fared well over the past nine years with Li Keqiang in that post. Given the premier's nominal responsibility over the economy and some other areas of public policy over which Xi has faced criticism in the past, having a factional rival in that position gives him a possible scapegoat to absorb much of the blame for failed policies that result in economic or social challenges.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Composition of Key Leadership Bodies Will Also Be an Indicator of Xi's Influence**

The greatest quantitative indicator of Xi's consolidation of power will be seen in the number of Xi allies appointed to the CCP's top governing bodies, especially the Politburo and PSC.

The PSC has over time fluctuated in size between five and nine members. Currently, it consists of seven, and this number has been consistent through Xi's two terms. Generally, the larger the size of the PSC, the more fractured the leadership is. By the same token, a PSC with fewer members usually reflects a more centralized leadership. If the size of the PSC increases or decreases, this will provide possible clues about Xi's power. Nevertheless, this is not a hard, fast rule. Ultimately, the makeup of the PSC is far more significant than the number of members; the body's expansion from seven to nine members in 2002 was cited by some as an effort by outgoing general secretary Jiang Zemin to stack the body with his allies.<sup>34</sup>

Assuming Xi stays in power, those slated to retire—including Premier Li—all step down, and the others who have not yet surpassed the retirement age are reappointed to a second term, four people will remain in the PSC: Xi; CPPCC Chairman Wang Yang (a factional rival); First Secretary of the CCP Central Secretariat Wang Huning (who does not appear to be aligned with any faction but has served as a key adviser to the past three paramount leaders, including Xi); and Zhao Leji (a Xi ally). That will leave between one and five open spots, assuming the PSC stays within the five-to-nine-member range. The identities and factional affiliations of the new appointee(s) will reflect the extent to which Xi has consolidated his power going into the Party Congress. It will also help determine the degree to which there are constraints on his influence in the next five years.

The expectation that Xi will not retire according to the Party norms has led to speculation as to whether he will seek to delay the retirements of some of his proteges, such as NPC Standing Committee Chairman Li Zhanshu, who has been one of Xi's closest allies since the two ran neighboring counties in Hebei Province three decades ago.<sup>35</sup> While Xi's own reappointment past the customary retirement age is highly probable, he has given no indication that he will push for other exceptions, even among his closest allies. The one possible exception might be Liu He in the event that he remains the only Xi ally with the credentials to succeed Li as premier. Whether Xi would succeed at appointing Liu to that position is an open question. After months of rumors ahead of the last Party Congress that Xi intended to keep key ally Wang Qishan in the Standing Committee, Wang ended up retiring from his Party posts in accordance with the customary age limits, albeit he was appointed vice president and has reportedly continued to observe PSC meetings despite not officially being a member of the committee.<sup>36</sup> Whether this arrangement was Xi's original plan or was a contingency after a failed attempt to keep Wang in the PSC will likely never be revealed.

In any case, it would be unnecessary and counterproductive for Xi to keep his allies in the PSC beyond their expected retirements. While Xi can justify his own continued rule given his elevated status as the architect of China's "new era," he has shown no inclination to scrap the norms altogether. To delay retirements of his allies would undermine the very norms that restrict potential rivals from being in power long enough to pose a challenge to his long-term rule.

Furthermore, the dominance of Xi's faction in the Politburo means he has many more candidates to consider for PSC vacancies than his rivals. People from outside the Politburo have on occasion been parachuted into the Standing Committee, but in recent history, that has happened only when

a person was being groomed for a two-term stint as either general secretary or premier, as was the case with Xi and Li. Of the 18 current Politburo members who are not in the Standing Committee, 12 are believed to be Xi's allies.<sup>37</sup> Six of the nine not expected to retire are Xi allies, compared with just two Hu allies—Vice Premier Hu Chunhua and former Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo—and one—Tianjin Party Secretary Li Hongzhong—who is not part of Xi's inner circle but goes out of his way to seek Xi's favor. Of the two factional rivals, only Hu Chunhua likely poses a threat to Xi. Chen Quanguo, despite rising through Hu Jintao's faction, appears to have a good working relationship with the general secretary, and some even see him as a member of Xi's inner circle.<sup>38</sup>

Of even greater importance to Xi's longer-term goals will be the composition of the larger body of the Politburo. Roughly half of all current Politburo members will hit the retirement age before this year's Party Congress, and Xi will seek to fill as many of their vacancies with allies as he can. As with the PSC, Politburo members are formally chosen by the Central Committee, but their selection is actually the product of a complicated process of negotiation and political horse-trading.<sup>39</sup> The extent of his success will serve as a gauge of his existing influence and will also set the stage for his ability to continue leading the Party beyond the next five years.

Of course, Xi's ability to influence the Party over the longer term would depend on his stacking the Central Committee with reliable, young allies as well. Only then could he maximize the chance that Politburos 10 or 15 years in the future would still be amenable to his control. The vast size of the Central Committee and the lower profiles of many of its younger members will make it hard to assess his performance in this regard. Nevertheless, some resources under development that provide biographical sketches and professional ties of Central Committee members will likely provide additional insight into the body's factional makeup in the coming months.

## Other Indications of Xi's Power

Other indications of how powerful Xi has become will be seen in the official language and titles used to describe his role in the Party. In particular, it will be important to note any new roles he picks up or whether his leadership is further entrenched in Party orthodoxy.

The 19th Party Congress saw Xi Jinping Thought added to the Party charter, and months later it was codified in China's constitution. This was of great significance given that, with the exception of Mao, all previous leaders had their contributions to Party orthodoxy added at the end of

their final terms rather than the beginning of their second terms.<sup>40</sup> Xi is also the first Chinese leader since Mao to get his contribution codified as a “thought” (思想); Deng Xiaoping’s contributions were designated as a “theory” (理论), which is a step lower in Chinese official terminology.<sup>41</sup> Finally, Xi joined Mao and Deng as the only CCP leaders to have their names included in the Party charter and constitution—both Jiang and Hu had their governing philosophies added but without their names.<sup>42</sup>

Since shortly before that Party Congress and continuing through the present, senior officials throughout the country have gone out of their way to refer to Xi as the “core” of the Party, and since then Xi has repeatedly been referred to in state-run media as the “people’s leader,” a term reminiscent of the Mao era.<sup>43</sup> Any further changes in Xi’s status that come out of the Party Congress will serve as qualitative indications of how powerful he is. Such developments are more likely following the historical narrative Xi released during the Sixth Plenum in November, which set the stage for further codification of Xi’s key role in the Party.<sup>44</sup> In addition, there continues to be speculation that Mao’s old title of CCP chairman—which was discontinued in 1982—will be resurrected for Xi.<sup>45</sup> Such a move, while likely unnecessary for Xi’s consolidation of power, would be a further indication of how completely he has eclipsed his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

Perhaps even more important will be any institutional changes or flouting of Party custom by Xi or his allies, such as if key Xi people remain in their leadership posts beyond the retirement age. While Xi is expected to flout the norms for himself, if he manages to do so to keep additional allies on—especially for the purpose of filling a key role like premier—that will be indicative of an even more powerful Xi.

Changes such as those highlighted here will not only give clues as to how powerful Xi is ahead of the 20th Party Congress; they will also help determine how much political capital he will have with which to make bold decisions in China’s domestic and foreign policy, both enacting much-needed reforms to reduce systemic risks and further centralizing decision-making power around his inner circle.

## Policy Implications for the Next Five Years and Beyond

The 20th Party Congress will have profound implications for China’s trajectory in the coming five to 10 years. While the greatest impact will result from leadership appointments and their effects on China’s political stability and Xi’s ability to push through his policy program, the CCP work report presented at the congress will lay out what this program will look

like over the next five years and beyond as the Party pursues its 2035 goals. This publicly available document will not include concrete policies—those will be developed by government bodies at a later date—but it will be the most authoritative statement of the Party’s top-line plans. It will serve as the foundation driving the proceedings of the annual NPC sessions and the rationale for policy and regulatory developments in the coming years.

Xi Jinping has presided over a period of profound policy adjustments, and most of these changes had their roots in priorities that were presented at Party Congresses before they were implemented. People familiar with Party work reports presented at these gatherings understand the rationale behind these developments, even if the broad nature of the goals and priorities outlined in them makes it difficult to foresee every individual action. Some of the key changes Xi implemented in his first term—such as the efforts to purge the CCP of corruption and clean up the environment—were outlined in the work report presented by his successor Hu Jintao during the 18th Party Congress in 2012.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the policy direction of the past four years has been consistent with the priorities outlined in Xi’s work report at the 19th Party Congress.<sup>47</sup>

This Party Congress is unlikely to contain any big policy surprises for those familiar with the path Xi set forth in 2017. The work report presented that year provided a high-level overview of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (referred to in this paper as simply “Xi Jinping Thought,” although this abbreviation is not yet being widely used in official Chinese sources), the governance philosophy tasked with overseeing China’s transformation to achieve “socialist modernization” by 2035 and become “a great modern socialist country that is prosperous” by mid-century.<sup>48</sup>

This year’s work report will likely distill the 2035 vision into more specific priority areas. In so doing, it will also provide insight into where some of the more controversial aspects of Xi’s governance fit into the Party’s overall plan.

A brief overview of some of the likely impacts of the Party Congress on China’s political, economic, and diplomatic policies follows.

## Tightening of Political Control

Xi has overseen China’s greatest centralization of governing authority in decades. By all appearances, this will be a long-term trend, and the progressive tightening of Party control over society—and Xi’s control over the Party—is likely to remain the most conspicuous attribute of Xi’s leadership beyond the 20th Party Congress.

Xi entered office at a time of crisis. Reports of corruption among CCP elites proliferated under Hu's watch, helped by the rapid expansion of internet use and the advent of social media, which enabled these reports to spread in ways that they never had previously. Several widely reported incidents involving the conspicuous high consumption and disregard for legal and social norms among children of senior CCP officials resulted in such a loss of public confidence that Hu's last CCP work report in 2012 warned that failure to clean up the Party could result in its fall from power.<sup>49</sup> This, combined with the circumstances around Bo Xilai's dismissal and arrest, foreshadowed the systemic efforts to strengthen both Party discipline and the Party leadership over all aspects of society that Xi has overseen.

Xi will continue to enforce strict Party discipline following his reappointment to a third term. Xi Jinping Thought requires that cadres both obey the law and firmly align with the Party leadership on all issues. The crackdowns on official corruption and other political transgressions will likely continue unabated after the 20th Party Congress in order to both root out corrupt and unethical practices from the Party and continue Xi's efforts to purge the CCP of his potential rivals.

The Party will also continue to exert control over other areas of society. As stated in one oft-cited Xi quote, "Party and government, military, civilian and learning—east, west, south, north and center—the Party is leader of all."<sup>50</sup> These tactics continue to intensify, as seen in recent rules aimed at ensuring the entertainment industry promotes socialist values and incorporating Xi Jinping Thought into elementary school curricula.<sup>51</sup> Deepening the Party's role in all aspects of Chinese society will remain one of Xi's top priorities after the Party Congress.

## **Economic Realignment**

Since coming to power, Xi has overseen significant changes in how the government approaches the economy. The 19th Party Congress inaugurated a "new era" characterized by an emphasis of quality over quantitative growth figures, the mitigation of systemic risks, the intensified pursuit of indigenous development of key technologies, and the imperative of spreading wealth more evenly throughout society. These will remain among the most important economic objectives following the 20th Party Congress.

Efforts to transform China's economy were seen during the Hu Jintao era, and Xi started addressing systemic risks during his first term, but it was not until the 19th Party Congress that these priorities took center stage. During that congress, Xi's work report declared that the "principal contradiction"

in the economy had changed from “the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people versus backward social production,” which characterized Deng’s reform era, to “the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life.”<sup>52</sup> “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” was presented to address this “contradiction.”

Since the 19th Party Congress, additional milestones were marked that further supported the shift to a new development paradigm. Xi announced the eradication of “extreme poverty” in February 2021, declaring victory in the goal of having a “moderately prosperous society” by the CCP’s hundred-year anniversary.<sup>53</sup> While the imprecise definitions of *extreme poverty* and *moderate prosperity* raise questions about what was achieved, there is no question that poverty reduction has been a consistent policy objective in the Xi era and that economic conditions have improved significantly in China’s underdeveloped rural regions during his time in office. The next milestone is 2035, the date Xi set as the deadline for China to achieve “socialist modernization.”<sup>54</sup> Finally, at the Sixth Plenum in November 2021, the Central Committee adopted Xi’s historical resolution, which eliminated any remaining question that Deng’s era of reform and opening is over and China has officially entered Xi’s “new era.”<sup>55</sup>

The economic priorities emerging from the 20th Party Congress will largely build on the objectives laid out in the 19th Party Congress work report and provide direction for the next steps toward achieving the 2035 goals. Xi’s work report will cover a wide range of priorities and will include many buzzwords that have become ubiquitous in official discourse, such as “the New Development Framework,” “dual circulation,” and “common prosperity.” In-depth discussions of these concepts and their meanings are available in other sources. For the purposes of this report, it is sufficient to highlight a few of the most prominent themes in layman’s terms. These will likely include the following:

- **Making the economy higher quality, less risky, and more sustainable.** The CCP leadership will likely double-down on their efforts to remake China’s economy. One way they will do this is through continuing to tighten policy and crack down on sectors and practices that they view as presenting systemic risks, even if it means inflicting significant short-term pain on the economy.<sup>56</sup> The work report will likely highlight some specific sectors or practices to be brought to heel, which will most likely include technology, finance, real estate, and the other sectors that have been singled out in recent crackdowns. It will

also likely include continuing anti-trust crackdowns and attempts to force over-leveraged businesses in real estate and finance—especially large private and state-owned firms—to divest holdings unrelated to their core business.

One practical way this will be done is through beefing up market regulators, as seen in recently revealed plans for growing and strengthening the State Administration for Market Regulation and the subsequent establishment of that body's new Anti-Monopoly Bureau.<sup>57</sup> These efforts will also be strengthened by the continuing development of the corporate social credit system, which will significantly increase the risks associated with regulatory noncompliance.<sup>58</sup>

- **Evening out the massive wealth disparity.** Though the CCP declared victory in its war on poverty early last year, it knows it has a long way to go before most of its citizens enjoy relative prosperity. Xi in his 2017 work report named growing the middle class and reducing urban–rural wealth disparities among the key indicators for the 2035 goal of “socialist modernization.”<sup>59</sup> Xi's 2022 work report will likely contain further insight into how he intends to carry out these endeavors. While Xi is not going to oversee a mass nationalization of private capital or revert China to the collectivization that characterized the Mao years, the five years following the 20th Party Congress will likely see the “common prosperity” push become more widespread, with an ever-growing slate of regulation and policies aimed at preventing the largest private businesses from dominating the wealth supply and possibly new taxes being created that target the wealthy.<sup>60</sup>
- **Turning China into an industrial powerhouse.** Industrial development was a key component of the 19th Party Congress work report and has become even more urgent since 2018 due to rising geopolitical tensions and the resulting supply chain risks. The work report presented at this Party Congress will most likely call for more urgent actions to fill gaps in China's technology supply chains due to the rising geopolitical tensions and concerns that the United States could prevent China from receiving key technology products and components. At the same time China attempts to develop self-sufficiency in its own supply chains, it will seek to keep itself integrated in the supply chains of other countries.

## Confrontational Foreign Policy

As with the other policy implications of the Party Congress, foreign policy will be impacted more by personnel appointments than by what is presented at the meetings. In addition to the questions surrounding Xi's continued role and the identity of the incoming premier, another important question that the Party Congress will reveal is whether China's top diplomat will sit on the Politburo, as was the case the past four years. The elevated status of the diplomatic establishment since Yang Jiechi was appointed to the Politburo at the 19th Party Congress has been cited as one reason for the abrasive tone in China's foreign relations.<sup>61</sup>

If Yang's replacement—assuming he retires this year in accordance with the age limits—is not a Politburo member, the diplomatic establishment will revert to its previous status of having messaging largely assigned by higher officials outside their hierarchy. This could potentially result in a less confrontational diplomatic style. However, there has been no indication that Yang's successor will not be a Politburo member; the CCP leadership may intend to include the chief diplomat in that body from now on given China's increasing international role and surging geopolitical tensions. Furthermore, given Xi's apparent support for “wolf warrior diplomacy” and its appeal to the Chinese masses, it is unclear whether the tone would change significantly even if the chief diplomat's status were downgraded. If the instructions diplomats are given are just as provocative as their own messaging has been since 2017, then the difference will be negligible.

Compared to domestic priorities, foreign policy typically plays a smaller role in the work reports presented at Party Congresses. However, intensified geopolitical opposition to China may lead to a more expanded discussion in this year's work report. During Xi's “new era,” China has gotten into a trade war with the United States and picked quarrels with many other key trading partners and neighbors. Mainstream global views of China have soured over the past few years, and China has only exacerbated the issue through its aggressive diplomatic style.

China is unlikely to substantially change course following the Party Congress. Even if Xi reins in China's diplomats and enforces a less confrontational form of diplomacy, the world's view of China is unlikely to revert to its pre-2018 state. China will not stop seeking to play an ever-growing role in the world, and it is in large part due to its growing and expanding role that the country has hit what one prominent Chinese scholar terms a “rise dilemma”: The stronger it becomes on the international stage, the more likely it is to face ever-stiffer opposition from the international community.<sup>62</sup>

The Party work report will likely provide insight into how Beijing plans to confront its geopolitical troubles, as well as what additional plans it has to reinvigorate the Belt and Road Initiative and strengthen its partnerships with developing countries in various regions. It will also address the status of goals aimed at creating a modern military capable of winning wars anywhere in the world by 2049.<sup>63</sup> The specific goals identified in this area will provide insight into the state of its military development.

## The Road Ahead

This report has provided an overview of what is currently known about the 20th Party Congress, some of the more likely outcome scenarios, and the broad impacts it will likely have on China's trajectory going forward. Officials, policy analysts, and others with interest in China should continue to monitor developments between now and next fall, when the Party Congress will most likely occur.

Particular attention should be paid to the jockeying and political horse-trading, which has already begun and will characterize the period between now and the start of the congress. Such positioning will take many forms but will be most clearly seen in personnel changes—especially in key provinces and municipalities—and anti-corruption purges. The crackdowns currently underway in multiple sectors, though aimed in large part at addressing noncompliance in anti-monopoly and other regulatory areas, also likely serve to keep elements of Xi's opposition on the defensive and help set the stage for the economic realignment measures that will be unveiled during the Party Congress.

## Appendix: People to Watch

Xi Jinping is not the only person who matters in China's political system. If he holds onto power for a third term, as expected, his ability to implement his platform will depend in large part on the makeup of the key leadership bodies, particularly the Politburo and its Standing Committee. Clues regarding the extent of the mandate the Party hands him will also be seen in his success—or lack thereof—at getting one of his allies appointed as premier. While an exhaustive list of the people who could influence these outcomes is beyond the scope of this report, some of the most important people to watch in relation to the 20th Party Congress are identified below.

**Li Keqiang, Premier.** Shortly after the Party Congress, Li will complete his second term as premier and will be constitutionally required to step down from that role. Whether he will remain on the Standing Committee is an open question, however. When the Party Congress is held later this year, he will remain below the customary retirement age for senior CCP cadres, meaning that he could stay in the PSC in a different capacity for one more term. This is significant, as Li is a factional rival of Xi, and his staying in the top decision-making body would mean one fewer spot Xi can place an ally.

**Hu Chunhua, Vice Premier.** Hu is the only vice premier not slated to retire at the 20th Party Congress and is currently the most qualified candidate to replace Li as premier. Born in 1963, Hu will be just 59 years old when the Party Congress is held and would be eligible to serve in that position for 10 years, assuming customary retirement ages are respected. However, Hu is a protégé of current Premier Li Keqiang and former General Secretary Hu Jintao and is likely among Xi's least preferred candidates for this position. Xi may use a variety of tactics to block Hu's appointment, from attempting to appoint one of his protégés as vice premier ahead of the Party Congress or delay Vice Premier Liu He's retirement and make him premier to possibly targeting Hu in an anti-corruption investigation. Such actions would be difficult to carry out, and if Xi were successful, it would provide insight into the extent of his power. Hu has powerful backers and so far has continued to move up the ladder during Xi's reign. As things currently stand, Hu has a pretty good chance of becoming the next premier.

**Chen Min'er, Party Secretary of Chongqing Municipality.** Chen's rise within the Party has been momentous: His 2017 appointment as Party Secretary of Chongqing Municipality, replacing Sun Zhengcai—a rising star widely seen as Xi's eventual successor, who was purged from the CCP amid an anti-corruption investigation—put him in the international spotlight as a likely successor to Xi in 2022. Though Chen was not appointed to the PSC

in 2017, making it nearly impossible that he will replace Xi this year, Chen is still one of the Xi allies with a good chance of gaining PSC appointment at the 20th Party Congress. As he will turn 62 years old in September, he has two terms remaining before he is expected to retire, making him a possible choice to succeed Xi in the event that Xi retires in 2027.

**Liu He, Vice Premier.** Liu turned 70 in January and is expected to retire. However, as Liu is one of Xi's most trusted advisers and has been China's chief negotiator at trade talks with the United States, Xi may attempt to delay his retirement and possibly appoint him as premier. He may also arrange for Liu to retire from the Party but remain involved in politics in an unofficial or government position, as occurred with Wang Qishan in 2017.

**Cai Qi, Party Secretary of Beijing Municipality.** Cai's career has taken off in recent years thanks to his long-standing association with Xi, whom he worked under in Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces. Cai's appointment as Beijing Party Secretary in 2017 was unprecedented, catapulting him directly into the Politburo without his ever having been on the Central Committee. In addition to being part of Xi's inner circle, Cai is 66 years old, meaning he will be among the oldest people eligible for appointment to the PSC. Officials with one term remaining before retirement tend to have better chances of getting into the PSC than do their younger peers, who often face stiffer opposition from factional rivals.<sup>64</sup>

**Li Qiang, Party Secretary of Shanghai Municipality.** Another rising star who served under Xi when the latter was Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province, Li now presides over one of China's two most important cities and its greatest financial center. Li will turn 63 in July, giving him exactly five years before hitting the retirement age of 68. Li is a strong candidate for PSC appointment at the 20th Party Congress.

**Li Xi, Party Secretary of Guangdong Province.** As Party Secretary of one of China's most important provinces, which serves as a feeder for higher positions, Li's prospects for advancement in the 20th Party Congress are good. Furthermore, he is considered a Xi ally due to family connections going back to the 1980s and also his ties to Xi ally Wang Qishan.<sup>65</sup> With one term remaining before retirement (Li turns 66 in October), Li is likely to be appointed to a central Party post to make way for a younger Xi ally to enter the Politburo via Guangdong, but he may not be among Xi's top choices for the PSC.

**Ding Xuexiang, Director of the CCP General Office.** Ding is a close ally of Xi, having worked as his secretary while Xi was Party Secretary of Shanghai. Ding's current leadership of the General Office gives him a lot of oversight into the inner workings of the Party. His relative youth—he

turns 60 in September, making him eligible for two more terms—could make him a possible successor to Xi in 2027 if he is appointed to the PSC this year. However, he lacks the provincial Party Secretary experience that is generally seen as qualifying people for such positions. His young age will also make him less palatable to factional rivals.

**Chen Quanguo, Former Party Secretary of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.** Chen has earned global infamy due to his role in overseeing the program of forcibly detaining and re-educating Uighurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. Chen, who will turn 67 this November and likely has one term remaining before retirement, rose to prominence while Party Secretary of Tibet (2011–2016). Although his leadership of two restive ethnic minority regions gives him strong credentials for promotion to higher office, he would be an unorthodox choice for the PSC given his lack of experience leading the Party in any of China’s main economic or population centers. Nevertheless, as one of just two Hu Jintao–Li Keqiang protégés in the Politburo that are not expected to retire, attempts could be made to place him in that body. He is also likely the most acceptable Hu protégé from Xi’s perspective. Chen was abruptly removed from his position in Xinjiang in December 2021. Though state-run media reported that Chen will be moved to another position, so far no information has been revealed regarding his new assignment and future role in the Party.<sup>66</sup>

**Li Hongzhong, Party Secretary of Tianjin Municipality.** Li will also turn 66 this year and has one term left before he is expected to retire. Though lacking any obvious previous connections with Xi and reportedly close with former General Secretary Jiang Zemin, Li has repeatedly spoken in favor of Xi’s role as the Party “core.” Though his credentials are not as strong as some of the other Politburo members, his lack of a clear factional affiliation could make him a possible consensus candidate for higher office, possibly even the PSC.

**Huang Kunming, Head of CCP Propaganda Department.** Huang, who turns 66 in November and is eligible for another term, based on Party custom, worked under Xi in Zhejiang Province and is considered a member of his core circle. Huang does not appear to have the leadership experience that would justify a PSC appointment, and he is likely to remain in a central Party position similar to his current job.

## Endnotes

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7. Bruce J. Dickson, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. 47.
8. For a discussion of how Xi rose to the top of the Party hierarchy, see *ibid.*, pp. 59–63.
9. See Cheng Li, "Xi Jinping's Inner Circle (Part 2: Friends from Xi's Formative Years)," Hoover Institution, *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 44 (July 2–14), pp. 6–8, <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm44cl.pdf> (accessed February 4, 2022).
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16. Some of the more useful tools for understanding the backgrounds of Central Committee members are MacroPolo, "The Committee," <https://macropolo.org/digital-projects/the-committee/> (accessed November 16, 2021), and China Data Lab, "CCP Elites," 2021, <http://chinadatalab.ucsd.edu/elites/> (accessed November 16, 2021). However, factional ties are not always possible to ascertain due in no small part to their informal nature.
17. This argument is less prominent in the lead-up to this Party Congress than it was five years ago (before the 19th Party Congress that resulted in no heir-apparent and the 2018 constitutional amendment that scrapped presidential term limits), but conversations with China specialists indicate that many still view this as a technically feasible outcome. For some examples of publications that appear to assume this possibility, see McGregor and Blanchette, "After Xi," p. 12; Julian B. Gewirtz, "Could Xi Jinping Stay in Power After He Retires? Here's How Deng Xiaoping Did It," *ChinaFile*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/could-xi-jinping-stay-power-after-he-retires-heres-how-deng-xiaoping-did> (accessed February 5, 2022); 21st Century China Center, UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy, "Xi Takes Charge: Implications of the 19th Party Congress for China's Future," 2017, pp. 9–10, [https://china.ucsd.edu/\\_files/2017\\_xi-briefing-web.pdf](https://china.ucsd.edu/_files/2017_xi-briefing-web.pdf) (accessed February 5, 2022).
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