

Interpreting Xi Jinping's power from the CCP 19th Party Congress by Son Daekwon

Son Daekwon (daekwon@pacforum.org) is a Ph.D candidate at Peking University and a Korea Foundation fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS.

Although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) monopolizes power in China's one-party system, the party leadership is by no means monolithic. As in Western parties, the CCP's members represent an array of ideological orientations, political preferences, and often conflicting interests. As a result, a CCP's top leader also needs to seek support by accommodating the interests of other party members, strengthening his faction, and quelling opposing voices.

Yet, since President Xi Jinping took office in 2012, it has been reported that Xi, through a fierce anti-corruption campaign, purged rivals and potential adversaries, extended his clout throughout the CCP, and consolidated power to the point where it threatened the survival of the collective leadership system (集体领导制). Some even argue that Xi's power is tantamount to that of Chairman Mao Zedong or even emperors. This conclusion likely overstates the case. The CCP 19th National Congress (中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会), scheduled for Oct. 18, is a precious chance to gain insight into Xi's power within the CCP. This article offers five yardsticks to evaluate the consolidation of Xi's power, with the caveat that the Chinese political system is evolving and unexpected events are to be expected.

First, look for Xi Jinping Thought (习近平思想): Since Mao Zedong, key thoughts or ideas of CCP's top leaders have been added to the Party's charter, a rough equivalent to the constitution of Western countries. Jiang Zemin's Important Thought of Three Represents (三个代表重要思想) was added to the charter in 2002, and Hu Jintao's Scientific Outlook on Development (科学发展观) was added in 2007. They both failed to have their names enshrined in the charter, however. Only two leaders, Deng Xiaoping and Mao, did that with Mao Zedong Thought (毛泽东思想) and Deng Xiaoping Theory (邓小平理论).

Since early this year, there have been many news reports that the CCP may amend its charter to incorporate Xi's political philosophies – Xi Jinping Thought. If his name is attached to the charter during this Party Congress, it means his power is elevated to that of the two founding fathers. This is no done deal, however. The CCP insinuated during the Politburo meeting on August 31 that there remain obstacles to break the collective leadership principle, by saying that the Party Congress will “thoroughly carry out the essence of Xi's series of important remarks and the new governance concepts,

thoughts and strategies of the CPC Central Committee.” In other words, the Politburo meeting implied that the thoughts and strategies will be made based on collective decision-making of the CPC Central Committee, rather than that of another Mao-like strongman.

Second, observe compliance with the *qishangbaxia* (七上八下) rule. To prevent creation of a gerontocracy, China has introduced an informal age limit for the Central Politburo Standing Committee members (中国共产党中央政治局常务委员会). The rule, known as “*qishangbaxia*,” dictates that only those who are 67 or younger can join the Standing Committee, while those who turn 68 years or older during their term must retire at the Party Congress. According to this rule, only General Secretary Xi and Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) can remain in the Standing Committee; the other five incumbent members must retire. There is speculation that Wang Qishan (王岐山), 69 years old, may break the rule and remain in office. His reappointment, albeit unlikely, would signify that Xi has fully consolidated power, given that Wang, as a secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (中国共产党中央纪律检查委员会), has served as the main enforcer of Xi's anti-corruption campaign. Moreover, once the rule is broken, it can set a precedent for President Xi himself in the 20th Congress in 2022. Flexible application of the *qishangbaxia* rule may encounter opposition from other party members.

Third, watch the number of seats in the new Standing Committee. Considering that the Central Politburo Standing Committee is the most authoritative and highest decision-making apparatus of the CCP, the number of members is of extreme significance. Upon Jiang Zemin's retirement in 2002, seats at the Standing Committee expanded from seven to nine. With more power shared among Standing Committee members, Hu Jintao's power was checked and balanced. Yet, when Xi succeeded Hu in 2012, the number was trimmed back to seven, giving more power to Xi. There is a rumor that the number may be reduced to five (membership of the Central Politburo Standing Committee is always an odd number to avoid a decision-making deadlock). If it is trimmed again, Xi will be able to consolidate his grip during the second half of his tenure. However, since cutting seats means depriving other high-ranking cadres of the chance to become a Standing Committee member, he may find it difficult.

Fourth, look at the composition of the new Standing Committee. The membership of the Standing Committee obviously also matters. Again, when Jiang stepped down in 2002, more than half the seats at the Standing Committee were taken by his allies or protégés, enabling Jiang to exercise influence after his retirement. Similarly, more members close to President Xi will facilitate his control. Scholars of Chinese factional politics expect that three to five of the following seven people will be appointed to the coming Standing Committee:

Chen Min'er (陈敏尔), secretary of Chongqing; Zhao Leji (赵乐际), head of the Organization Department; Li Zhanshu (栗战书), director of the General Office; Wang Yang (汪洋), vice premier of China; Hu Chunhua (胡春华), secretary of Guangdong Province; Wang Huning (王沪宁), director of the Central Policy Research Office; and Han Zheng (韩正), secretary of Shanghai. The first three are known to be close to Xi and are often classified as members of the Xi faction, *Xijiajun* (习家军), while the following two are believed to be members of Tuanpai (团派), or the Youth League Faction alongside Le Keqiang. The final two are often said to be successors of the Shanghai faction or *Shanghaibang* (上海帮) led by Jiang Zemin. Although demarcations between factions are ambiguous, an increase in *Xijiajun* members in the Standing Committee points to Xi's increasing power. Yet, there is very little possibility that all seats in the new Standing Committee will be occupied by Xi's protégés. Other cadres from different factions will also take seats for check and balance.

Last, watch what happens with Chen Min'er vs Hu Chunhua. To guarantee smooth leadership succession and policy continuity, the CCP usually selects the next general secretary and premier from the current Standing Committee members. Given the *qishangbaxia* rule, only two of the nominees mentioned above are eligible for those positions after 2022: Chen Min'er, born in 1960, and Hu Chunhua, born in 1963. If Standing Committee members are appointed from among these seven, it is likely that either Chen or Hu will become general secretary after Xi, and the other will succeed Li Keqiang as premier. Therefore, if Chen Min'er, an alleged protégé of Xi, gets a higher-ranking than Hu Chunhua during the quinquennial party meeting, it may be interpreted as Xi Jinping's consolidation of power. In fact, appointing Chen Min'er as his heir will not be easy, although not impossible, given that Chen is merely a Central Committee member with relatively inadequate political background. He spent twenty years only in Zhejiang Province before moving to Guizhou Province in 2012 and to Chongqing in July of this year. Hu Chunhua on the other hand is already a member of the CCP Central Politburo and has built a long political career in Tibet, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, and Guangdong Province.

It is highly unlikely that the CCP will make all five decisions in favor of President Xi. In other words, we may not see Xi Jinping Thought added in the Party charter, while Chen Min'er gets the upper hand over Hu Chunhua, and Wang Qishan retains one of the five seats of the Standing Committee, the rest of which are taken by other *Xijiajun* members. This would foreshadow a collapse of the CCP's collective leadership system, nevertheless. Instead, President Xi is likely to seek compromise. He may be compelled to forgo relatively insignificant goals to win over other party cadres, while protecting vital goals. The CCP collective leadership may be altered to some degree, but will survive.

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