

How Strong Is Xi Jinping?

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Assessments of the political strength of Xi Jinping have varied widely over the year since he became China's new top leader. This article addresses the question of Xi's power in light of the results of the 18th Central Committee's Third Plenum in November 2013 and of other recent trends.

Gauging the political strength and policy preferences of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) new general secretary Xi Jinping has been a major preoccupation of observers of Chinese leadership politics over the past year. Early estimates began in the summer of 2013 with the conclusion that Xi aspires to be the New Mao, enhancing his personal power at the expense of the collective leadership pattern of the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periods. These assessments pointed to Xi's use of phrases associated with Mao and saw the intra-party program launched in April 2013 to study and implement the "mass line"—whose format, procedures, and conduct replicated similar study programs over the past two decades, not mass campaigns of the Mao era—as reviving Maoist campaign tactics.

Those estimates were succeeded in the immediate wake of the 9–12 November 2013 Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee by new estimates of Xi as the New Hu. In the weeks preceding the plenum anticipation among Western media heightened that the plenum would authorize a new package of path-breaking economic reforms. These expectations built on the correct observation that third plenary sessions of successive Central Committees during the reform era have focused on the economy. They also rested on the declared commitment to reform of the Xi Jinping leadership, expressed from its inception. In this expectant context, the communiqué of the plenum, transmitted by the state news agency Xinhua on 12 November, landed with a plop. The abstruse jargon and toothless generalities of the communiqué, though typical of the genre in fact, indicated to many observers that Xi had failed to overcome the CCP's inertia and deliver anything of substance regarding economic reform, as had his supposedly ineffectual predecessor Hu Jintao.

Then, four days later, Xinhua publicized the long text of a 60-point Central Committee "decision" adopted at the plenum that outlined some 300 reforms across the entire policy arena. Xi now appeared to be architect of the most significant reform decision by any party leadership since Deng Xiaoping at the watershed 1978 Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee. No longer the New Hu, Xi now appeared to be the New Deng.

The wide variance in these estimations of Xi Jinping's power underscores the difficulties inherent in discerning the bases of personal power of any leader in China's opaque political order. Nevertheless, alongside the institutional posts a leader may hold, other clues—including his sponsorship of new policy initiatives, credit for new ideological

departures, public stature among other leaders, personal networks, and relationship with the military—offer points of departure for such judgments.

Xi and the Third Plenum

The 60-point decision adopted by the Third Plenum is easily the most comprehensive policy document passed by any Central Committee plenum since the beginning of the reform era in 1978. Propounded under the banner of “comprehensively deepening reform,” the decision mandated completion of reforms in seven major policy sectors by 2020. Although most foreign observers have focused on the plenum decision’s provisions for economic reform, only 22 of its 60 points deal with the economy. The document’s first four points lay out the ideological rationale for the decision, while the remainder cover political structure and legal reform (11 points), cultural reform (4 points), social services and “social management” reform (9 points), environmental issues (4 points), military reforms (3 points), and party reform (3 points).

In contrast, all previous Central Committee “decisions” (决议) since 1978 have dealt with single policy sectors, not the entire spectrum. For example, the 39-point decision on economic retrenchment adopted by the November 1989 13th Central Committee’s Fifth Plenum fleshed out a conservative three-year program to reassert control over an overheated economy that the year before had provoked the worst inflation of the reform era so far. Similarly, the 50-point “Decision on Several Important Issues in Establishing a Socialist Market Economic Structure” passed at the 14th Central Committee’s Third Plenum in November 1993 covered related issues of reform in the state-owned enterprise sector, banking and finance, taxation, foreign trade, and government-economy mechanisms.

Xi Jinping’s Role

To many observers, Xi Jinping’s leading role in drafting the Third Plenum decision and in presenting the draft to the Central Committee for its approval suggests that he is usurping power over policy sectors that, under the past division of policy labor among the Politburo and its Standing Committee, have been the purview of others in the top leadership, especially that of Prime Minister Li Keqiang. By this interpretation, the plenum thus offers clear evidence of Xi Jinping asserting his personal power over what previously had been a consensus-driven collective leadership.

One problem with this line of interpretation is that Xi’s role in presiding over the decision’s drafting and in presenting it to the plenum is not a violation of the longstanding division of policy labor in the leadership, but rather follows it. The unprecedented scope of issues that the plenum decision addresses means that only the general secretary had the breadth of authority to preside over its drafting and formal presentation.

In that regard, both the broad scope of the decision and the very order in which it addresses the various policy sectors resemble the Central Committee work report to a

party congress, a document whose drafting and presentation also falls to the party general secretary. Table 1 shows this resemblance.

Table 1

Topics Treated in Hu Jintao's 18th CCP Congress Report and the 18th Central Committee Third Plenum Decision

<i>Hu's 18th CCP Congress report</i>	<i>18th CC Third Plenum Decision</i>
I. Review of past five years' work	
II. Continuing the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics	I. Ideological basis of decision (Pts. 1–4)
III. Building a moderately prosperous society by comprehensively deepening reform	II. Affirmation of basic economic system (Pts. 5–8)
IV. Improving the socialist market economy	III. Perfecting the modern market system (Pts. 9–13)
	IV. Transforming government functions (Pts. 14–16)
	V. Fiscal & taxation reform (Pts. 17–19)
	VI. Urban-rural issues (Pts. 20–23)
	VII. New economic structure (Pts. 24–26)
V. Political structural reform	VIII. Socialist democratic political system (Pts. 27–29)
	IX. Establishing rule of law (Pts. 30–34)
	X. Constraining use of power (Pts. 35–37)
VI. Building socialist culture	XI. Cultural system reform (Pts. 38–41)
VII. Social services reform	XII. Social services reform (Pts. 42–46)
	XIII. Social management (Pts. 47–50)
VIII. Environmental reform	XIV. Environmental policy (Pts. 51–54)
IX. National defense	XV. Military reform (Pts. 55–57)
X. Hong Kong-Macao/Taiwan policy	
XI. Foreign policy	
XII. Party reform	XVI. Party reform (Pts. 58–60)

It is true, as a long Xinhua account noted in the wake of the plenum, that the decision is the first to have been drafted under the leadership of the party general secretary “in this century.”¹ Table 2 (next page) bears out this claim for plenums since the 2002 16th CCP Congress, though not necessarily for the decade preceding it.

The evident pattern in which leaders present Central Committee decisions pertaining to the specific policy sectors they preside over invites the conclusion that the unprecedented breadth of the Third Plenum decision determined that Xi among the top leadership preside over its drafting. From that perspective, Xi's role with regard to the plenum decision is an affirmation of, not a deviation from, standard practice regarding leadership policy responsibilities.²

(text continues on page 6)

Table 2
Central Committee Decisions and Their Drafters since 1992

<i>CC: Plenum</i>	<i>Decision</i>	<i>Drafting and Presenting Leader</i>	<i>Presenting Leader's Policy Portfolio</i>
14th: 1st 19 Oct 1992	None		
14th: 2nd 5–7 Mar 1993	“Proposals on Adjusting Several Targets in the 8 th 5YP” and “Plan for Reform of Party & State Structure”		
14th: 3rd 11–14 Nov 1993	“CC Decision on Several Important Issues in Establishing a Socialist Market Economic Structure”	Jiang Zemin?	
14th: 4th 25–28 Sept 1994	“CC Decision on Several Important Issues in Strengthening Party-Building”		
14th: 5th 25–28 Sept 1995	“Proposals on Drafting the 9 th 5FYP National Economy and Social Development and the 2010 Long-Term Goals”	Li Peng (PBSC—premier)	Government administration & economy
14th: 6th 7–10 Oct 1996	“CC Decision on Several Important Issues in Strengthening the Building of Socialist Spiritual Civilization”		
14th: 7th 6–9 Sept 1997	None		
15th: 1st 19 Sept 1997	None		
15th: 2nd 25–26 Feb 1998	“Plan for Reform of State Council Structure”		
15th: 3rd 12–14 Oct 1998	“Decision on Several Important Issues in Agriculture and Rural Work”		
15th: 4th 19–22 Sept 1999	“Decision on Several Important Issues in SOE Reform & Development”		
15th: 5th 9–11 Oct 2000	“Proposals on Drafting the 10 th 5FYP National Economy & Social Development”	Zhu Rongji (PBSC—[premier])	Government administration & economy
15th: 6th 24–26 Sept 2001	“Decision on Strengthening & Advancing Building of Party Workstyle”		
15th: 7th 3–5 Nov 2002	None		
16th: 1st 15 Nov 2002	None		
16th: 2nd 24–26 Feb 2003	“Opinions on Deepening Administration and Management System & Institutions Reform” & “Plan for Reform of State Council Structure”		
16th: 3rd 11–14 Oct 2003	“CC Decision on Several Important Issues on Perfecting the Socialist Market System”	Wen Jiabao (PBSC—premier)	Government administration & economy

16th: 4th 16–19 Sept 2004	“Decision on Strengthening the Building of the Party’s Governing Capacity” “Proposals on Revising Some Content of the Constitution”	Zeng Qinghong (PBSC) Wu Bangguo (PBSC—NPC chairman)	Party apparatus Legislative affairs
16th: 5th 8–11 Oct 2005	“Proposals on Drafting the 11th 5FYP National Economy and Social Development”	Wen Jiabao (PBSC—premier)	Government administration & economy
16th: 6th 8–11 Oct 2006	“CC Decision on Several Important Issues in Building a Socialist Harmonious Society”	Wu Bangguo (PBSC—NPC chairman)	Legislative affairs
16th: 7th 9–12 Oct 2007	None		
17th: 1st 22 Oct 2007	None		
17th: 2nd 25–27 Feb 2008	“Opinions on Deepening Administration and Management Reform” and “Plan for Reform of State Council Structure”		
17th: 3rd 9–12 Oct 2008	“CC Decision on Several Important Issues in Promoting Rural Reform & Development”	Hui Liangyu (PB)	Agriculture
17th: 4th 15–18 Sept 2009	“CC Decision on Several Important Issues in Strengthening & Advancing Party Building under New Conditions”	Xi Jinping (PBSC)	Party apparatus
17th: 5th 15–18 Oct 2010	“Proposals on Drafting the 12 th 5FYP National Economy & Social Development”	Wen Jiabao (PBSC—premier)	Government administration & economy
17th: 6th 15–18 Oct 2011	“CC Decision on Several Important Issues in Deepening Cultural System Reform & Promoting the Development & Flourishing of Socialist Culture”	Li Changchun (PBSC)	Ideology & propaganda
17th: 7th 1–4 Nov 2012	None		
18th: 1st 15 Nov 2012	None		
18th: 2nd 26–28 Feb 2013	“Plan for the Transformation of State Council Structure and Functions”	Li Keqiang (PBSC—premier designate)	Government administration & economy
18th: 3rd Nov 2013	“CC Decision on Comprehensively Deepening Reform”	Xi Jinping (PBSC—CCP general secretary, PRC president, CMC chairman)	

NOTE: CC = Central Committee; PB = Politburo; PBSC = Politburo Standing Committee; CMC = Central Military Commission.

(continued from page 3)

The makeup on the the decision-drafting group also accords with policy responsibilities. One deputy, Zhang Gaoli, is the executive premier with focus on the overall economy and was likely responsible for marshaling the economic reform aspects of the decision. The other deputy, Liu Yunshan, is responsible for the party apparatus and for ideology and culture and so was likely responsible for coordinating those parts of the decision. Xi, in addition to negotiating the military reforms, presided over the whole process.

This conclusion has been adduced to rebut the speculation that Xi is centralizing power in his hands at the expense of his colleagues. Hu Angang, director of the Institute of National Affairs Research at Qinghua University and author of a recent and unusually candid book about the party Politburo's collective leadership processes, dismissed "endless talk among outsiders" about Xi's concentrating power and "marginalizing" of other leaders, arguing that Xi's role was determined by the standing division of labor among the top leadership. "The new CCP Central Committee," Hu insisted in that regard, "has set down clear rules and arrangements regarding the building of the Politburo, including work mechanisms and collective decision-making." (新一届中央也就政治局自身設建設包括工作機制、集體決策做出 明確的規定和部署).

Furthermore, Xi's role presiding over the drafting of the plenum decision does not mean that it is exclusively a product of his initiative. Major elements in the plenum decision's content were foreshadowed in Hu Jintao's work report to the 18th Party Congress in November 2012. For example, the overarching theme of "comprehensively deepening reform" to build a "moderately prosperous society" by 2020 was prominent in the Hu report. In addition, among several specific steps, the intention to establish a new, high-level state security body was also declared in the congress report. The implications of these foreshadowings are, first, that the Third Plenum decision's framework and at least some of its specifics were already substantially in the works heading into the party congress in 2012. Second, to the extent that they were incorporated into Hu's congress report, the plenum decision's themes and substance already carried the imprimatur not only of the present Xi leadership but also the outgoing Hu leadership.

In that regard, it is likely that Xi Jinping convened the meetings of the group that drafted Hu's congress report in the months preceding the party congress, and so presumably Xi had a significant impact on what the Hu report said. Past practice suggests that during leadership transitions, the incoming and outgoing leaders collaborate in composing such documents because the retiring leader delivers the draft report but the incoming leader must oversee its implementation after assuming power. In 2002, for example, Hu Jintao convened the drafting group that wrote the Central Committee report that Jiang Zemin delivered at the November 2009 16th CCP Congress, his last as party general secretary. Similarly, Wen Jiabao presided over the drafting sessions that produced the State Council work report delivered by retiring Premier Zhu Rongji at the 10th National People's Congress in 2003.

But in each case the drafting proceeded under the authority of and following guidelines set down by the outgoing leader. And the congress document, once approved by the full

party congress, reflects the consensus of the entire leadership, not just outgoing and incoming leaders. To the extent that the Third Plenum decision's themes and substance were foreshadowed in Hu's report to the 18th Party Congress, they carry the endorsement of both the present Xi leadership and the now retired Hu leadership.

The New Coordination Groups

The plenum mandated the establishment of two new leadership groups—one to supervise and coordinate implementation of the plenum decision, and the other a new State (or National) Security Committee. Xi's appointment as director of both groups considerably expands the roster of institutions over which he presides. How much the new appointments expand his power remains to be seen.

The Central Leading Group for the Comprehensive Deepening of Reform appears to be an emerging super group that will preside over and set priorities for a hierarchy of parallel reform leading groups in State Council ministries and commissions and in all provinces. In addition, judging by Xinhua's report on the group's first meeting on 22 January, the group itself will have at least six subgroups, one for each major policy sector treated in the plenum decision: economy and environment; political and legal reform; cultural system reform; social reform and management; party-building; and reform of the party discipline inspection system. The group appears to be a temporary leading small group (LSG) rather than a permanent one, with its tenure expiring in 2020 when the reforms it is intended to coordinate—according to the plenum decision itself—are to be completed.³

Xinhua's report on the 22 January first session of the group reported the appointment of Liu Yunshan and Zhang Gaoli—both of whom had been Xi's deputies in coordinating the drafting of the Third Plenum reform decision—as well as Premier Li Keqiang as the group's deputy directors. In addition, the group's agenda of reforming the party's discipline inspection system means that Central Discipline Inspection Commission Chairman Wang Qishan is likely a member. Also, insofar as the group's purview includes politics (the PRC's "socialist democratic" processes) and law, National People's Congress Chairman Zhang Dejiang may well be a member. Xi Jinping himself will guide the military reforms called for by the plenum decision, either through the Central Military Commission (CMC), over which he presides, or in collaboration with an undisclosed CMC member on the new reform group. Finally, the plenum decision calls for reforms in the Chinese People's People's Consultative Conference (CPPCC) system, it is not beyond speculation that the seventh—Yu Zhengsheng, who presides over the China's united front institutions—sits as a member of the group.

In addition, some of the existing leading small groups (LSGs) of both the party Central Committee and State Council will coordinate their functions with it. An analysis published by the Hong Kong communist newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* on 15 November 2013, immediately after the plenum, stated specifically that the group would guide the Central Committee Finance and Economy Leading Small Group. But presumably several other Central Committee LSGs—the Ideology and Propaganda LSG, Party-Building LSG, and the Politics and Law Committee—will also work with the new group.

Taking these arrangements together, the new reform LSG will include at least five and possibly six or even all seven of the seven-man roster of the Politburo Standing Committee. The scale of organization of this group and the seniority of its membership suggest three conclusions. First, it attests to the commitment of the top leadership as a group to the reforms set forth in the Third Plenum reform decision and their ambitions to break the evident deadlock in recent years on new reforms. Second, Xi's appointment as the new group's director follows the same logic of the division of policy labor evident in his role in drafting the plenum decision and presenting its draft to the plenum. Third, Xi's personal power is not clearly enhanced by his role in leading the reform group. Far from undercutting the authority of other members of the top party leadership, the group's creation and apparent roster merely transplants rather than supplants the Politburo Standing Committee collective into a new institutional setting established to coordinate the reforms. Xi's ability to direct the reforms therefore rests on his ability to sustain the consensus among that broader group behind them.

The new Central State Security Committee (中央国家安全委员会) appears to be a work whose provenance and purview are in progress. The establishment of the group was foreshadowed in Hu Jintao's work report to the 18th Party Congress in November 2012, which stated, in its "social management" section: "we should establish a sound mechanism for assessing potential risks that major policy decisions may pose for social stability." The same section stipulated further, "we should improve national security strategy and its work mechanism to keep high vigilance against and resolutely forestall activities of separatism, infiltration and subversion carried out by hostile forces to ensure national security."

The Third Plenum decision was somewhat more specific, while remaining unclear about the new group's provenance. It stated merely that a "state security committee" would be established to "perfect the state security system and the state security strategy to ensure state security" (Point 50). This phrasing appeared to leave open the question of where the new security body would sit. In contrast, the plenum decision called on the "Central Committee" (中央) to establish the LSG for the Comprehensive Deepening of Reform—indicating that the new reform LSG would be a Central Committee body. At the time of the plenum, therefore, the placement of the new security group in the party of state hierarchies was as yet undecided. Finally, Xinhua's 24 January report on a Politburo meeting that day stated definitively that the new security group would be named the "Central State Security Committee" (中央国家安全委员会) and would report to the Politburo and its Standing Committee.

The 24 January Politburo meeting, according to Xinhua, also confirmed that Xi Jinping will serve as the new security group's director and revealed that Premier Li Keqiang and NPC Chairman Zhang Dejiang will serve as Xi's deputies. Much of the attendant commentary on the body's creation conveys the impression that its work will focus on domestic security and stability concerns and on international trends and activities that bear on them. Some early commentary has suggested that the new body's authority will be shaped by NPC legislation, which would explain Zhang's role. Li's role follows

naturally from the numerous security and “social management” functions that fall under the State Council.

Beyond these inferences not much else is not clear. It is apparent that a major shakeup is under way in China’s internal security sector, indicated by the decision to drop appointment of the Central Committee’s Politics and Law Committee director as a Politburo Standing Committee member at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 and in the ongoing investigations of the committee’s retired director Zhou Yongkang. How that committee, which continues to meet and which is now directed by Politburo member Meng Jianzhu, as well other security institutions, such as the Central Committee National Security LSG led by Xi Jinping, relate to the new security body is not at all clear.

Xi and the PLA

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is a major constituency in Chinese politics and the top leader’s relationship with the PLA is a critical ingredient in his power. In that respect, Xi’s assuming the chairmanship of the CCP’s and PRC’s Central Military Commissions immediately in step with his succession to Hu Jintao as CCP general secretary and PRC president is a clear advantage to him, in contrast to Hu’s succession to those military posts in a staggered fashion three years later. Jiang Zemin gained the CMC posts only five months after succeeding Deng Xiaoping on 1989, but his tenure as top military leader was assisted or perhaps complicated for three years by the role on the CMC of Deng ally Yang Shangkun. On the face of it, Xi begins his tenure as top military leader in a better position than either Jiang or Hu.

How much personal support Xi enjoys from the PLA brass, however, is not clear. In his early years as CMC chairman, Jiang Zemin was reported in PRC media regularly visiting PLA bases and meeting with PLA leaders. At the time, these activities were interpreted by foreign observers as efforts by a weak leader with no military experience or with no military ties to establish relations with the PLA brass and to gain their respect for his authority. Hu Jintao, it was widely noted, only occasionally engaged in such activities, and so he was seen as having weak, distant ties to the PLA brass. Xi Jinping has frequently visited military installations and consorted with the PLA leadership. Plausibly, these activities may be seen as reflecting his comfort in dealing with the PLA brass and their acceptance of his leadership. Or they may alternatively be seen as efforts by Xi to establish his authority and gain acceptance by the PLA brass, reflecting a relative insecurity with respect to the military.

Ultimately, Xi’s visits to PLA bases may not tell us much either way regarding his personal relationship with the brass. They may instead have more to do with the impending military reforms mandated by the Third Plenum. Among other things, the plenum decision called for steps to “complete CMC joint operations command organs and theater joint operations command systems” and other steps to facilitate the PLA’s ability to wage joint operations. According to an article published in the 16 November edition of *Ta Kung Pao*, these steps may include merger of China’s seven military regions into four or five war theaters (战区) and enhanced support for the PLA Navy, Air Force, and strategic forces (2nd Artillery). Over his first year as CMC chairman, Xi

Jinping visited six of China's seven military regions (omitting only Nanjing) and major naval bases at Dalian and Sanya, in addition to the 2nd Artillery headquarters. By contrast, over his first year as CMC chairman in 2004–2005, Hu Jintao visited only two.

A Xi Faction?

Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao both shored up their power in the early years of their tenure as party general secretary. Jiang's effort to build what became known as the "Shanghai gang" began with his elevation of Zeng Qinghong, chief of his personal staff in Shanghai, to become head of the sensitive General Office immediately after his appointment as general secretary in 1989. Jiang's faction-building expanded in 1994 when Shanghai crony Huang Ju was added to the Politburo and Wu Bangguo, also from Shanghai, and Jiang Chunyun, from the nearby province of Shandong, were added to the Secretariat. During Hu Jintao's tenure, colleagues from his days leading the Communist Youth League Secretariat in the early 1980s crept into central and provincial leadership positions, constituting a "Youth League faction" in the party leadership. Several remain on the current Politburo lineup.

So far, a clear effort by Xi to build a factional coterie of followers is hard to see. Xi does have a longstanding friendship with Wang Qishan and Yu Zhengsheng, as Cheng Li's article in this issue of the *Monitor* shows persuasively. Xi may also have had a crony, Li Zhanshu, already installed as head of the sensitive Central Committee General Office on assuming the post of general secretary in 2012, thanks to the surprising political demise of Ling Jihua that year. He also relies on a group of favored advisers, including Liu He (currently director of the Finance and Economy LSG's general office) and perhaps Wang Huning, who has worked both with Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao and may become general office chief of the Central LSG for the Comprehensive Deepening of Reform. But the contours of anything resembling Jiang's "Shanghai gang" or Hu's Youth League faction are not so far apparent.

Xi and Collective Leadership

What has not changed in the succession from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping has been the stress on collective leadership in the Politburo and its Standing Committee and the treatment of the general secretary as first among equals. For example, Xi Jinping has not been identified in PRC media as the "core" of the new leadership. The concept of a "core leader" was put forward in June 1989 by Deng Xiaoping to help shore up the authority of Jiang Zemin as general secretary, an emergency appointment in the context of the Tiananmen crisis that spring. Throughout his 13-year tenure as general secretary, PRC media routinely referred to the 14th and then the 15th Central Committee "leadership collective with Comrade Jiang Zemin as the core." In contrast, in an apparent leveling step to convey a public image of collective leadership, PRC media across Hu Jintao's tenure referred only to the 16th and 17th Central Committee "leadership collective with Comrade Hu Jintao as general secretary." Since the 18th Party Congress, PRC media have steadfastly referred to the 18th Central Committee "leadership collective with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary" or more simply as "the 18th Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary"

Nor has Xi garnered personal credit in PRC media for any new ideological departure that adds to the vast storehouse of Marxist-Leninist theory. During his tenure, Jiang Zemin was given credit for pioneering the “important thinking of the three represents” in 2000, among other innovations. By contrast, several new ideological departures emerged under Hu Jintao in his first term, including the emphasis on “people-centered” governance, the “scientific development concept,” the “new socialist countryside” agenda, and the idea of a “socialist harmonious society.” Nevertheless, all of these innovations were depicted in PRC media not as Hu’s personal intellectual property but rather as reflecting “the crystallization of the collective wisdom of the 16th Central Committee leadership with Comrade Hu Jintao as the general secretary.” The “China dream” theme aside, Xi so far has not been given special recognition, following the pattern set in the Hu era.

Conclusion

The preceding perspectives may aid in assessing Xi Jinping’s political strength more accurately and in context. Critical elements of personal political power—faction-building and solid ties to the PLA brass—appear so far to be either limited or lacking, although they may emerge more clearly ahead.

If at the end of his first year as top leader Xi appears powerful, it is rather because he has a mandate bestowed by the broader leadership at the 18th Party Congress to break the deadlock in policy-making that was apparent over the second term of Hu Jintao’s tenure as party leader. Thus far, Xi’s power appears to rest foremost on the consensus among his colleagues in the Politburo Standing Committee behind the reform themes announced at the 18th Congress and behind the broad package of reforms they outlined in the Third Plenum decision. The unanimity of strong reform rhetoric among Standing Committee leaders—and especially Xi and Premier Li Keqiang—over the year from the party congress to the plenum attests to this consensus, as does the effort at the Third Plenum to establish a potent mechanism—the new Central Committee LSG for the Comprehensive Deepening of Reform—to impart concerted guidance to and energy behind the reforms.

The continuity in stress on collective leadership in media treatment of the leadership from the Hu period into the Xi era underscores this conclusion. Rather than reflecting a campaign of personal aggrandizement and power-mongering by the new top leader, the leadership trends since the 18th CCP Congress suggest instead a leadership collective around Xi that enjoys a mandate for a concerted push at new reform after the frustrations of the later Hu years. Insofar as the new reforms succeed or fail, the credit or blame will accordingly attach to the leadership as a group and to Xi’s ability to sustain its commitment behind them.

Notes

¹ Qin Jie 秦杰, Xu Jingyue 徐京跃, Huo Xiaoguang 霍小光, and Hu Chunyu 华春雨, “Let the Banner of Reform Wave on High: A Chronicle of the Birth of the Party Central Committee Decision on Several Issues in the Comprehensive Deepening of Reform” (让改革旗帜高高飘扬 — 《中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定》诞生记), *Xinhua*,

18 November 2013, and *People's Daily*, 19 November 2013, p.1. It is noteworthy that Xinhua did not say that a party general secretary had never presented a draft decision to a Central Committee before this century. In that regard, it is likely that then General Secretary Jiang Zemin presented the 50-point decision on economic reform to the 14th Central Committee's Third Plenum in 1993, though he probably did so not in his role as general secretary but rather as head of the Central Committee Finance and Economy Leading Small Group, which would have managed the drafting process.

² Since the onset of the reform era in 1978, official communiqués issued at the end of Central Committee plenums normally did not mention which leader presented a draft decision to the plenum until the beginning of the Hu Jintao period in 2002.

³ Central Committee LSGs appear to come in two varieties—temporary (阶段性小组) and permanent (常设性小组). An example of the former was the Central Committee LSG for Preparatory Work for Convening the Olympics, set up soon after Beijing received the right to host the 2008 games and directed by Zeng Qinghong and then Xi Jinping. It was dissolved once the games ended. An example of the latter is the Central Committee Foreign Affairs Work LSG, which was established in June 1958, abolished during the Cultural Revolution, and restored in March in 1981.