

The Road to the Sixteenth Party Congress

H. Lyman Miller

The scheduling of the Sixteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party by a recent Central Committee plenum inaugurates a prolonged process of preparations that will dominate leadership politics over the coming year and color Beijing's approach to policy in all areas. Expected to convene in the fall next year, the congress will lay the foundation for subsequent policy departures and put into place a new generation of top Party leaders. Judging by the themes of leadership statements and press commentary in recent months, the focus of the Congress is likely to be reform of the Communist Party itself so that it can better manage China's increasingly market-driven economy and the impact of China's upcoming entry into the WTO.

The Long Campaign to 2002

Party congresses are the most authoritative public events in the politics of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC). By party statute, party congresses convene every five years and fulfill three basic functions. First, they assess the work of the party in major policy arenas over the preceding five-year period since the last party congress. Second, they define the party's overarching "general task" as well as the priorities and approaches--the party's "line"--for all significant policy realms for the coming five-year period. Last, they appoint (or re-appoint) the party's top leadership.

The first two tasks are addressed in the long "political report" delivered to the congress by the party general secretary in the name of the last congress's Central Committee. The last is performed in two steps. First, the congress elects a new Central Committee, the body which has the authority to act in the name of the full congress in the years between party congresses. The Central Committee is composed of roughly 200 party members drawn from the most important leaders in the party apparatus and from the PRC state, military, united front, and provincial hierarchies. The new Central Committee then convenes its first full session--a first "plenum"--the day after the congress closes. The plenum in turn elects the party's top leaders, as well as a new Politburo--the party's supreme decision-making body--and Secretariat, which supervises implementation of leadership decisions throughout the party and in other institutions.

Because the functions that party congresses perform are fundamental, preparations for convening them are intensely political. Once endorsed by the full party congress, the ideological themes and policy lines contained in the congress political report become the most authoritative expression of party policy in the areas they address. In principle, at least, all party leaders must justify policy actions in terms of the party line adopted at the congress or as modified at subsequent Central Committee plenums.

Similarly, judgments in the congress political report about the successes and shortcomings of party work over the five-year period since the previous congress reflect on the careers of leaders responsible for them. Shifts in ideological theme and policy lines incorporated in the political report likewise carry implications for the political fortunes of individual leaders and constituencies within the party. The roster of the new Politburo emerging from a Central Committee's first plenum reflects as much an effort to match leadership personnel to the policy agenda as the policy agenda emerging from a congress political report reflects the new constellation of power at the top.

Paralleling the impact of election campaign cycles in the United States, party congress preparations charge the political atmosphere in Beijing a year or more ahead of time and color the leadership's approach to other policy sectors during that period. Top party leaders begin laying out ideological themes that they want incorporated into the upcoming congress's political report as the foundation for new policy departures. They may also defer controversial decisions, preferring instead to establish a stronger platform at the congress for decisive action later. The party's newspaper *People's Daily (Renmin Ribao)* and semi-monthly political journal *Seeking Truth (Qiushi)* carry opinion pieces on policy issues under debate as the congress looms ahead. New appointments to posts that usually convey concurrent seating on the Central Committee--such as directors of Central Committee departments, State Council ministers, military region commanders and political commissars, and party secretaries and governors in the provinces--are made with an eye to the upcoming party congress. Meanwhile, because much of the politicking that precedes a party congress is conducted in internal party channels, political rumors and speculation about the leadership flourishes more than ever in Beijing, many of which are recorded breathlessly in the independent China-watching press in Hong Kong. For these reasons, the long and contentious processes that prepare for a party congress provide telltale signals both of the issues under debate and trends in leadership politics.

Preparatory Committee

Preparations for convening a party congress in the past have been overseen by a preparatory committee appointed by the Politburo. For both the Fourteenth Congress in 1992--the last congress of the Deng Xiaoping era--and the Fifteenth Congress in 1997--the first of the post-Deng era--preparatory committees were headed by party General Secretary Jiang Zemin.

If Beijing follows past practice, the membership of the Sixteenth Congress preparatory committee will not be made public until after the congress opens. Several reports in the independent China-watching press in Hong Kong have meanwhile stated that the preparatory committee for next year's congress is headed by Jiang's widely presumed successor as Party chief, Hu Jintao. This is not altogether implausible, as many such Hong Kong speculations are; if true, it would add to the evidence that Hu is indeed slated to

succeed Jiang as general secretary next year. There is, however, no other public evidence to support this report.

The preparatory committee serves at least three basic functions. First, it oversees the process of electing delegates to the party congress. Second, it coordinates the drafting of the political report to be delivered by the general secretary. Finally, it presides over the process of nominating the slates of candidates for election to the new Central Committee, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission, the Politburo, the Secretariat, and the Central Military Commission.

The process of delegate selection, judging by past practice, takes several months. In the case of the 1992 Fourteenth Party Congress, the process was inaugurated by the Thirteenth Central Committee's Eighth Plenum in November 1991, which scheduled the party congress for sometime in the fall quarter of 1992. A subsequent Central Committee circular in December 1991 stipulated specific qualifications for delegates and spelled out the election procedure for their election. Through the spring and summer of 1992, party congresses in thirty-four institutional blocs--encompassing each of China's then thirty-one province-level units (including "representatives" from Taiwan), the Central Committee departments, the central state institutions, and the PLA--elected their allotted quotas, for a total of 1,991 delegates to attend the congress. In 1996 and 1997, a similar procedure was used to elect 2,048 delegates to the Fifteenth Congress.

If similar procedures are used for the Sixteenth Congress next year, the Sixth Plenum, which convened on September 24-26 and which scheduled the Sixteenth Congress "for the latter half" of next year, has inaugurated a comparable process of delegate selection.

Drafting the Political Report

Although the general secretary delivers the main political report to a party congress, the political report is a consensus document that he reads in the name of the outgoing Central Committee, not a recitation of his personal political and policy views. He may have played a dominant role in drafting the report, and it may therefore bear his heavy imprint. But the political report finally delivered to the congress is the product of a long process of drafting and review, so that it reflects much more than his singular view.

In the case of the last two party congresses, the final version of the political report that Jiang Zemin delivered in each case emerged from a drafting process that spanned nearly a year and that proceeded "under the direct leadership of the Politburo Standing Committee." In the case of the 1992 Fourteenth Party Congress report, General Secretary Jiang Zemin personally supervised a process that produced 10 successive drafts incorporating several hundred suggestions for revision by more than 3,000 reviewers. This process--which will undoubtedly be deployed again for next year's congress--unfolded over nine months and included the following steps:

- After the drafting committee was constituted, Jiang personally set down guidelines for a first draft in a meeting in February 1992.
- On April 30, 1992, the first draft was reviewed by the Politburo Standing Committee, leading to a second and then a third draft.
- On June 9, 1992, Jiang delivered a keynote address to a graduating class at the Central Party School, raising nine new issues that were then incorporated into a fourth draft.
- The fourth draft was submitted to the full Politburo for discussion and to Deng Xiaoping, then retired, for comment later that month. The drafting committee produced a fifth and then a sixth draft on the basis of these reviews.
- The sixth draft thereafter was disseminated as an “internal party document” to 119 central, provincial, and local units throughout the party, state, military, and mass organization hierarchies. In addition, the party’s United Front Work Department--the Central Committee organ responsible for party liaison with non-party bodies--circulated the sixth draft among organizations and associations grouped under the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) for comment. This stage of review produced some 450 suggestions for revision.
- After addressing these suggestions and further review by Jiang Zemin, the drafting committee produced seventh and eighth drafts. The eighth draft was reviewed by the Politburo Standing Committee and then by the full Politburo.
- On the basis of this review, a ninth draft was endorsed by the Politburo for presentation to the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee, which convened on October 5, 1992. The plenum review introduced 170 new revisions for a tenth draft, which was finally endorsed by the plenum and delivered by Jiang to the assembled 2,000 delegates at the Fourteenth Party Congress’s opening session on October 12, 1992.

Over the entire seven-month drafting process, Jiang met personally with the drafting committee three times, the Politburo Standing Committee discussed separate drafts four times, the full Politburo discussed drafts twice, and other top leaders met with the committee on occasion.¹

The drafting of the political report that Jiang delivered at the 1997 Fifteenth Congress followed a similar procedure over ten months. That process began with Jiang’s initial meeting with the drafting committee in December 1996. Drafts were reviewed in formal session by the Politburo Standing Committee three times, and one draft saw broad review by more than 4,000 people among party, state, military, and non-party units at central, provincial, and local

levels in July 1997. In the end, the process produced a total of ten drafts drawing on more than 800 revisions.²

This elaborate process of drafting and review produces what is intended to be a highly authoritative consensus document. If party congress delegates look bored and sleepy as the general secretary delivers it aloud, it is, in part at least, because they have seen its text before--and, in the case of some delegates, several times before.

Assuming that the preparatory committee for next year's congress follows the same procedures, the process of drafting the political report will begin late this year or early next year. Some Hong Kong reports state that Party Politburo member and State Council Vice Premier Wen Jiabao--a rising candidate to succeed Zhu Rongji as State Council premier--has been appointed to guide the process of drafting the political report. Those reports are likely false, judging by past practice. In principle, the political report is delivered to the party congress by the general secretary as an account of the work of the outgoing Central Committee. In that case, Jiang Zemin would remain the responsible leader both to supervise its drafting and its delivery, as he did at the congresses in 1992 (after taking the general secretary post in 1989) and in 1997. If Hu Jintao is in fact slated to succeed Jiang as general secretary, he might be expected to have a hand in guiding its drafting and, in an impressive signal of his emergent promotion, to deliver it.

One account from the independent China-watching media has reported that the drafting group has already been named. According to this account, the drafting group is headed by Central Committee Policy Research Center Director Teng Wensheng, and includes Zheng Bijian, Li Junru, and Xing Benshi of the Central Party School, Wang Huning and Ji Yuxiang, also of the Policy Research Center, and former *People's Daily* Director Shao Huaze.³ If true, this group's composition may reflect a calculated balance to ensure that various outlooks within the party are adequately heard in drafting the report. Teng's career rose in association with conservative reform leaders in the 1980s. He served in the party Secretariat Research Office, then headed by the now marginalized Deng Liqun from 1981 to 1987, and in 1988 he served as deputy secretary-general of the party Central Advisory Commission, then headed by the now deceased rival of Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun. He joined the Policy Research Center as deputy director upon Jiang Zemin's succession as general secretary, and he was promoted to director in 1998.⁴ In that role, he frequently travels with Jiang on inspection tours in China and abroad, and presumably he frequently supervises the drafting of Jiang's speeches.

Balancing Teng, Zheng Bijian may reflect a more liberal reform outlook. Zheng served as personal secretary first to General Secretary Hu Yaobang from 1981 until Hu's demotion in 1987, and then to General Secretary Zhao Ziyang until Zhao's purge in 1989. During Zhao's tenure, Zheng also served as vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and director of its staunchly liberal Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. He served as executive deputy director of the party Propaganda Department

through the 1990s. He was appointed executive vice president of the Central Party School in September 1997, and where he has since worked closely with school President Hu Jintao.⁵ Both Zheng and Teng are graduates of Chinese People's University, though more than a decade apart (1954 and 1964, respectively). The neo-conservative Wang Huning and liberal Xing Benshi might play comparable balancing roles on the drafting committee.

Nominating the New Central Committee and Leadership Bodies

The process of composing a new Central Committee is managed by the congress preparatory committee together with the party's Organization Department. The present director of the Organization Department is Zeng Qinghong, formerly chief Jiang Zemin's personal staff during Jiang's posting in Shanghai in the 1980s and a close collaborator with Jiang since moving to Beijing in 1989. Widely reputed as a man possessing extraordinary bureaucratic skills, Zeng first served a deputy director of the Organization Department from 1989 to 1993, then as director of the party General Office--a key gate-keeping post from which Zeng managed Jiang's and the Politburo leadership's logistics, communications, and paper flow. In 1999, he returned to the Organization Department, this time as chief, an appointment likely made in anticipation of the upcoming Sixteenth Congress. In the coming year, Zeng will work with Jiang and presumably Hu Jintao, who managed the nomination process for the Fifteenth Congress in 1997.

They will not start from scratch. The Central Committee normally includes most incumbents of top posts throughout the party, state, and military hierarchies, such as heads of the Central Committee departments and State Council ministries, provincial party chiefs and governors, and military region commanders and political commissars. At the time of its election in 1997, the Fifteenth Central Committee, for example, included nine Central Committee department heads, twenty-nine out of forty State Council ministers, six of seven military region commanders and six of seven political commissars, thirty out of 31 provincial party chiefs and twenty-six of thirty-one governors.

Appointments to such posts are made in the normal course of politics, not at a party congress. Therefore appointments to these posts before an upcoming congress likely are made with an eye toward inclusion in the new Central Committee. Over the past two years, for example, Beijing has replaced several provincial party secretaries and governors. Many of the new appointees do not currently hold Central Committee posts, but they may expect to gain membership at the party congress next year.

By the same token, officials who are members of an outgoing Central Committee but who are not re-appointed to the new one are likely slated to lose the posts that originally gained them membership. In the past, for example, the selection for Central Committee membership at the 1997 congress of only twenty-nine of forty State Council ministers foreshadowed the sweeping State Council reform announced at the 1998 Ninth National People's Congress, which streamlined the State Council from forty to twenty-nine ministries.

Analytically, therefore, much of the new Central Committee's membership may be discerned ahead of the congress from appointments a year or two ahead of the party congress. Similarly, close analysis of the membership of the new Central Committee, once announced, assists divination of forthcoming leadership changes following the congress.

With respect to nominations for the Politburo, its Standing Committee, and the Secretariat, the process is undoubtedly far less mechanical, the politicking is far more intense, and so predictions are on far more shaky ground. Nevertheless, if past practice remains a reliable guide, some guesses may turn out better than others. The Politburo Standing Committees appointed in 1992 and 1997--the period of transition from the Deng Xiaoping era--appeared to follow a rough template that may guide leadership selection at that level next year. In both cases, the new Politburo Standing Committee included seven men who held top posts in other hierarchies or served specific policy roles. In both cases, in addition to the general secretary, the Politburo Standing Committee included the men elected the following year as State Council premier, chairman of the National People's Congress, and chairman of the united front umbrella CPPCC. In addition, the each Politburo Standing Committees included one member who worked with the general secretary in managing the party apparatus and one vice premier who assisted the premier in managing the economy. Finally--in the only difference in membership--the 1992 Standing Committee included one military veteran, included to assist Jiang Zemin's leadership of the PLA, while the 1997 Standing Committee included no military leader and substituted the head of the Party's Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC).

If the Politburo Standing Committee appointed next year follows a comparable template in incorporating key leadership roles, then the range of possible appointments narrows. Also, if the rule that evidently mandated retirement of leaders at age seventy at the 1997 congress still holds, then the pool of candidates for appointment to the Standing Committee next year is reduced. Five of the seven current members of the present Standing Committee--Li Peng, Zhu Rongji, Li Lanqing, Wei Jianxing, and Jiang himself--will be seventy or older by the time of next year's congress and are presumably slated to retire. In addition, six of the remaining 16 full and alternate members of the Politburo may be expected to retire by the same rule.

Under these limiting presumptions and barring "helicopter" promotions, the guessing game is somewhat simpler. If Hu Jintao succeeds Jiang as general secretary, possible Standing Committee promotions include Wen Jiabao (in the role of premier), Li Ruihuan (as NPC chairman), Luo Gan (as CDIC chairman), Wu Bangguo (as economic czar), and Zeng Qinghong (as Party apparatchik). In addition, the new Standing Committee may again include a military representative to assist Hu in establishing his authority over the PLA. Who actually is appointed to the Standing Committee next year, of course, may follow a different logic from the past two instances and turn out to be something completely different.

Forecasting the Sixteenth Congress's Focus

Leadership statements and commentary in PRC media foreshadowed the main themes and ideological departures of past party congresses. In 1992, the Fourteenth Congress authoritatively redefined China's political economy as a "socialist market economy," a step that provided a much firmer ideological foundation for the more concerted effort after the congress to reform the state-owned industrial enterprises at the heart of the former Stalinist-style "planned economy." That landmark shift was preceded by Deng Xiaoping's controversial assertion, during his tour of China's southern provinces in early 1992, that markets are as compatible with socialism as with capitalism and by Jiang Zemin's endorsement, in a major speech at the graduation ceremonies of the Central Party School in June, of that thesis and other themes enshrined in the congress report the following fall.

The overarching shifts at the Fifteenth Congress--the first of the post-Deng period--were the enshrining of a strongly reformist interpretation of "Deng Xiaoping Theory" as the Party's contemporary ideology and a redefinition of what constitutes the sector of "public ownership" under socialism. Both steps consolidated the political ground for the three-year program of transforming state-owned industrial enterprises through corporate share-holding announced at the beginning of 1997 and for the reorganization of the State Council ministries and their relation to the industrial economy inaugurated in 1998. These themes had been foreshadowed by leadership statements over the previous two years and, as in 1992, by a speech by Jiang Zemin at the Central Party School in May 1997, three months before the congress.

The policy themes of the Sixteenth Party Congress will likely be signaled, as was the case preceding the past two party congresses, in a major speech to the graduating ceremonies of the Central Party School next May, delivered by Jiang Zemin or conceivably Hu Jintao. In the past three years--during which no party congress was scheduled--Hu, as president of the school, delivered the graduation speech. If he delivers the speech at 2002 graduating ceremonies, it would be further evidence of his impending succession to the post of general secretary.

In the meantime, if leadership statements and press commentary are reliable indicators, the upcoming party congress is likely to focus on reform of the party itself. For nearly two decades, the party has debated how it will reconstitute its linkages into China's society as the economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping and pressed ahead by Jiang Zemin transformed the planned command economy of Mao's era into an increasingly market-driven one. As the effort to transform the state-owned enterprise system began in earnest in 1997 and as China's entry into the WTO has loomed, the answer the Jiang leadership has proposed to this question is the "three represents"--the assertion that the party must in the future "represent the development trend of advanced productive forces, the orientation of advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the majority of China's people."

The “three represents” formula was first enunciated by Jiang Zemin in a tour of southern provinces early last year. In the year and a half since, the “three represents” concept has been the focus of a tremendous volume of press commentary. As the reformist ideological shifts preceding the 1992 and 1997 party congresses did, it has also generated stiff opposition among party conservatives, who see in the concept’s implications the withering away of any credible claim the party may still make to being a “proletarian” workers’ party. Nevertheless, all members of the current Politburo have endorsed the concept. It was also the centerpiece of Jiang Zemin’s long speech on the party’s eightieth founding anniversary on July 1--a document that itself reflects the leadership’s consensus and not just Jiang’s personal viewpoint and that is now the object of a massive national study campaign. The just concluded Sixth Plenum similarly affirmed the “three represents,” noting that the idea answers “the basic questions of what kind of party to build and how to build the party under new historical conditions.”

If party reform based on the “three represents” concept is in fact the focus of the upcoming party congress, a number of steps may emerge from it:

- The party constitution will be rewritten. The preamble may be revised to incorporate the “three represents” concept as Jiang’s personal legacy. Its opening statement defining the party’s fundamental identity-- that the party is “the vanguard of the Chinese working class, the faithful representative of the interests of the people of all nationalities, and the core leading China’s socialist cause”--may be revised.
- In addition, the stipulations on party membership under Article I may be revised to facilitate admission of the commercial, managerial, scientific and technical, and other social elites that have emerged under the reforms. The present party constitution stipulates that members may be drawn from among “workers, peasants, members of the armed forces, intellectuals, or any other revolutionary” committed to the party’s cause. The stipulation in Jiang Zemin’s party anniversary speech last July that owners of capitalist enterprises may apply for party membership underscores the thrust of this aspect of the “three represents” concept, but, in fact, the party had already moved steadily in this direction for several years by recruiting among emerging social elites.
- The congress may authorize a number of new departures in the party’s operating processes. Recent press commentary and leadership speeches have stressed, among many things, the need for more institutionalized and rational leadership selection procedures and better mechanisms of supervision and responsibility.

The political reforms that follow from the “three represents” idea are aimed at enabling the Party to maintain power by co-opting emerging economic, scientific and technical, and other social elites. They are also aimed at shaping the party to manage an economy even more internationally engaged, thanks to WTO entry, and to govern an increasingly commercially-oriented urban society. If institutionalized, the “three represents”

may therefore mark a watershed in China's political evolution. Their scope and impact, nevertheless, are not likely to satisfy many dissidents and Western observers, whose hopes for liberal systemic changes encompassing competitive multi-party democracy amount to expectations of political revolution, not political reform.

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¹Xinhua in English, October 23, 1992, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *China Report*, FBIS-CHI-92-207 (October 26, 1992): 22-25.

²Xinhua in Chinese, September 25, 1997, in World News Connection, FBIS-CHI-97-268.

³ Duowei Xinwenshe, July 17, 2001, via Chinesenewsnet.com.

⁴*Who's Who in China: Current Leaders* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), p.593, and *China Directory* (Tokyo, Radiopress, Inc), various years.

⁵*Who's Who In China: Current Leaders*, p.913, and *China Directory*, various years.