

The Road to the Third Plenum

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Since the 18th Party Congress, the Xi leadership has launched two carefully orchestrated, interrelated campaigns to demonstrate its seriousness about eradicating corruption and to improve public support for the regime. The twin campaigns appear aimed at paving the way to economic and government reforms at the 18th Central Committee's upcoming Third Plenum that Chinese media promise will be substantial.

The two efforts include a concerted drive to combat party corruption and a study campaign on the “mass line,” the party’s traditional mechanism for staying in touch with the concerns of broader society. Both emerged immediately after the 18th Party Congress and have played out amid a broader leadership focus on the party itself. Of eight regular sessions of the 18th Central Committee Politburo since last November, six have dealt with internal party affairs. In addition, an irregular “special session” of the Politburo convened over four days in June as part of the mass line campaign. In addition, three of the Politburo’s eight study sessions over the same period also focused on party affairs.

Direction of the two campaigns has proceeded according to the normal division of policy labor among the top leadership. Under Xi Jinping’s overall guidance, Politburo Standing Committee member Liu Yunshan, who as executive secretary of the Secretariat manages the party apparatus, is directing the year-long mass line campaign. Wang Qishan, also a Politburo Standing Committee member and the chairman of the party’s watchdog body, the Central Disciplinary Inspection Commission (CDIC), is spearheading the anti-corruption drive.

The Mass Line Campaign

The party’s “mass line education and implementation campaign” (党的群众路线教育实践活动) formally began on 19 April, when the Politburo authorized its launch.¹ The campaign did not emerge out of the blue but was foreshadowed in leadership statements since the 18th Party Congress in November 2012.

The campaign was mandated explicitly in the Central Committee work report delivered at the 18th Party Congress by outgoing Party General Secretary Hu Jintao. “To maintain the party’s advanced nature and purity,” the report stated, “we should carry out intensive activities throughout the party to study and practice its mass line, with the focus on the need to serve the people and to be down-to-earth, honest and upright in conduct.” “We should make determined efforts to improve the style of writing and the conduct of meetings, and reject undesirable practices such as mediocrity, laziness, laxity and extravagance, the practice of just going through formalities, and bureaucratism,” it continued, adding, “we should use the party’s fine conduct to enhance party cohesiveness, win popular support and improve the conduct of the government and the general public.” Hu’s work report to the 17th Party Congress in 2007 had called for

efforts to purge similar maladies from the party's work style but did not call for a mass line campaign to achieve it.

The day after the party congress closed, in his first public statement upon appointment as party general secretary, Xi Jinping foreshadowed what would become the priorities of both the mass line campaign and the anti-corruption drive. "There are many pressing problems within the party that must be resolved, especially such problems as corruption and taking bribes by some party members and cadres, being out of touch with the people, placing emphasis on formality and bureaucracy that must be addressed with great effort," Xi stated. While most foreign observers took particular note of Xi's introduction of achieving "China's dream," Xinhua's English account highlighted his comments on addressing the party's problems. (Xinhua, 15 November 2012)

On 4 December, the Politburo discussed and approved a ban on eight official abuses intended to improve the party's work style and "link the party closely to the masses." Declaring that improving the party's work style is a "matter of life and death for relations between the people and the party," the Politburo resolved that it must itself take the first steps first before demanding that other party bodies do so. The Politburo called on "Party and government bodies at various levels and leading cadres to take people as the foundation and govern on behalf of the people, taking the lead in improving work style, going to basic levels to investigate and do research, connecting closely to the masses, and solving real problems."

The Politburo program for improving party work style included the following eight points for attention by all party leaders:

- Do investigations and research, guard against going through the motions and practicing formalism, travel light with a only a small entourage, reduce accompanying staff, and simplify receptions with people;
- Simplify meeting activities, enhance the effectiveness of meetings, shorten meetings and speeches, and ban empty talk and verbiage;
- Simplify documents and bulletins, stop routinely issuing documents and reports that have no real content and that need not be issued;
- Standardize official visits abroad, strictly control the numbers of accompanying personnel, and strictly use communications tools according to regulations;
- Improve security work, reduce traffic controls, and under general conditions not block traffic, clear areas or close off hotels or restaurants;
- Improve news reporting, decide questions of whether or not to report Politburo members presiding over meetings and other activities according to the needs of work, news value, and social effects, and progressively reduce the volume, number and length of reports;

- Regulate issuance of draft documents and, except under uniform central provisions, stop publishing their own works or speech collections in open media, and stop issuing congratulatory letters or telegrams or writing inscriptions; and
- Strictly enforce working hard and practicing economy, and strictly carry out relevant work and livelihood remuneration regulations with regard to allocation of housing, cars, etc.

The Politburo ordered the General Offices of the Central Committee and State Council to monitor compliance with these regulations annually and report their findings to meetings of the Politburo and its Standing Committee. (Xinhua, 4 December 2012) On 22 December, Xinhua reported the Central Military Commission adopting a parallel 10-point program for improving party work style in the PLA. (Xinhua, 22 December 2012)

The eight-point regulations thereafter became routinely and consistently the focus of public remarks by Liu Yunshan in a variety of contexts presaging the campaign. In a meeting on party organization issues on 23 December, for example, Liu stated:

We must carry out mass line education and practice activities with doing practical things for the people and being clean and non-corrupt as their main content, and treat these activities as an important content of strengthening style building. We must attach importance to investigation and study, put forward proposals, ensure relevance and effectiveness, and truly allow party members and cadres to be educated in the activities in order to reach the goal of “looking in the mirror, straightening one’s dress, taking a bath, and curing the disease” (照镜子、正衣冠、洗洗澡、治治病) in ideological thinking and in work style. (Xinhua, 23 December 2013)

Liu made similar remarks during an “investigation and study tour” of Shaanxi and Yan’an in January and Tianjin in March.

Campaign Launch

The 19 April Politburo meeting that authorized the mass line campaign stipulated a year-long effort that would begin at the top in party leaderships in central institutions and work its way down through county levels. The Politburo mandated use of the eight-point regulation for improving work style that it endorsed on 4 December as the campaign’s point of departure and “working for the people and being practical and incorruptible” as its “main content.” Reiterating a formulation that Liu Yunshan was the first to employ in public statement in December, the Politburo called on party leaderships at all levels to “implement the general requirement of ‘looking in the mirror, straightening one’s dress, taking a bath, and curing the disease.’” (Xinhua, 19 April 2013)

On 21 May, Liu Yunshan convened the inaugural meeting of the Central Party Mass Line Education and Practice Activities Leading Small Group (中央党的群众路线教育实践活动领导小组). According to Xinhua, Liu serves as director of

the group, with Organization Department Director Zhao Leji and CDIC Deputy Secretary Zhao Hongzhu as his deputies. In remarks to the meeting, Liu noted that “General Secretary Xi Jinping has given important directives and put forth clear requirements many times” that the Politburo and its Standing Committee convene meetings on the campaign. (Xinhua, 21 May 2013)

The mass line campaign was formally launched on 18 June when a “work conference on conducting the party’s mass line education and implementation activities” convened in Beijing. Presided over by Liu Yunshan and addressed by Xi Jinping, the meeting was attended by the full Politburo Standing Committee leadership and the Beijing-based members of the Politburo, as well as the top leaders of the National People’s Congress, the State Council, the Supreme People’s Court and Procuratorate, and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference who are concurrently members of the CCP.

In his speech, Xi Jinping spelled out the specifics of the campaign’s content:

The education in practice should focus on self-purification, self-perfection, self-reform, and self-improvement, and it should follow the general requirements of “looking into the mirror, straightening one’s dress, taking a bath, and curing sickness.” “Looking into the mirror” primarily means using the Party Constitution as the mirror; measuring ourselves against party discipline, the masses’ expectations, the advanced models; measuring ourselves against the requirements for improving work style; and laying out the issues, finding the gaps, and setting a clear direction on the questions of purpose, awareness, work style, probity, and self-discipline. “Straightening one’s dress” primarily means following the requirement of being pragmatic and honest for the people; boldly facing the flaws and inadequacies, strictly enforcing party discipline, especially political discipline; daring to touch on ideology; squarely facing contradictions and issues; starting with ourselves and now; setting right our conduct; consciously sprucing up party spirit and training; sorting out party members’ obligations; and closely enforcing party discipline and state laws to maintain a good image for communists. “Taking a bath” primarily means conducting criticism and self-criticism in the spirit of work style rectification; deeply analyzing the causes of problems; removing the dust in our thoughts and actions; and maintaining the communists’ true political color. “Curing sickness” primarily means upholding the principle of learning from past mistakes to avoid future ones, and curing the sickness to save the patient; prescribing the right medicine for sickness based on different circumstances; educating and exhorting party members and cadres who have problems in their work style; investigating and punishing those whose problems are serious; and taking ad hoc measures to deal with unhealthy practices and prominent issues.²

The campaign, Xi added, should include “criticism and self-criticism in spirit of rectification” (整风) and proceed through “democratic life meetings” (民主生活会). Taking the Politburo’s eight-point regulation as the yardstick, the campaign should combat the “four bad styles”—formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism, and extravagance—and “conduct a massive inspection, overhaul, and housecleaning on the unhealthy styles and indecent behavior.” (Xinhua, 18 June 2013) The next day, a *People’s Daily* editorial greeted the campaign’s launch and party circulars mandated party- and PLA-wide study of Xi’s speech. On 24 June, the newspaper began a series of Commentator Articles to guide study of the implications of Xi’s speech.

The Politburo itself led the way in launching the campaign in a four-day “special meeting” (专门会议) on 22–25 June. The session heard reports that surveyed implementation of the Politburo’s 4 December eight-point regulations on party work style throughout central party and state bodies, assessed the Politburo’s own record in implementing the regulations, and adopted new rules to improve party work further. (Xinhua, 25 June 2013)

In cascading fashion, the campaign proceeded into central organs beneath the Politburo and to the provinces. On 27 June, Xinhua reported that all 31 province-level party committees would convene campaign mobilization meetings in early July. On 7–8 July, the Central Military Commission held a “democratic life meeting” (民主生活会) to address an agenda paralleling the Politburo’s: reviewing implementation in general headquarters units and beyond of the Politburo’s eight-point regulations and its own 10-point regulations adopted in mid-December, assessing its own adherence to the regulations, and deliberating on further rules to improve the work style of party leaderships in the PLA. (Xinhua, 8 July 2013) On 10 July, central media reported the dispatch of 45 inspection teams to an initial group of 259 State Council ministries, state-owned enterprises, and provinces to monitor their progress in carrying out the campaign.

On 12 July, Xinhua reported the seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee leaving the capital to inspect the conduct of the campaign personally. Xi Jinping visited Hebei on 11–12 July, touring Zhengding county, where he had served as party secretary in 1982–85. He also stopped in Xibaipo—the site of the CCP’s temporary headquarters before moving to Beijing in 1949—where he endorsed the “two musts” (Mao Zedong’s enjoinder that party members must be “modest, prudent, and free from arrogance and rashness” and must “preserve the style of plain living and hard struggle.”) Hu Jintao had also endorsed the “two musts” during his visit to Xibaipo in December 2002, his first domestic trip outside the capital after becoming party general secretary. On 16 July, Xinhua reported the inspection tours of the other Standing Committee members in the provinces.

Campaign Mechanics

Though the mass line campaign generically shares a tradition of party rectification campaigns that go back to Yan’an, it is more narrowly typical of the more carefully circumscribed intra-party campaigns of the post-Mao period to promote party solidarity

ideologically and politically and to improve the party’s work style and public image than it is with the mass-driven criticism campaigns of the Mao era.

Campaigns in the era of Mao’s leadership were called mass “movements” (运动) and typically involved significant mobilization of broader society, not only to advance criticism of party members deemed ideologically and politically out of step but also to rally mass support for leadership goals. Mass campaign tactics of the Mao era were discarded following the 11th Central Committee’s Third Plenum in December 1978, which abandoned waging “class struggle” as the CCP’s foremost priority in favor of China’s economic modernization. That agenda prompted a return to a Leninist emphasis on discipline over Mao’s predilection for mass spontaneity and so has put a much higher premium on party regulations, the use of socialist law, and institutional order in managing the CCP’s relationship with the society it governs. Maoist mobilization of mass criticism of the party and its members is likely the last thing the Xi leadership—and before it the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao leaderships—seek with respect to China’s restive society.

In step with those priorities, political campaigns in the post-Mao period have been called intra-party “activities” (活动) or “education” (教育). Thus:

- The current mass line campaign is, strictly translated, the “party mass line education and implementation activities” (党的群众路线教育实践活动);
- The 2009–2010 campaign to study the “scientific development concept” was the “activities to study and implement the scientific development concept” (学习实践科学发展观活动);
- The 2005–2006 campaign to sustain the CCP’s “advanced nature” was, literally, the “all-party education activities to develop and preserve the advanced character of communist party members” (全党开展保持共产党员先进性教育活动); and
- The 1998–1999 “three stresses” campaign was, formally, the “education in party nature and work style taking ‘talking study, talking politics, and talking uprightness’ as the main content.”

In addition, the mechanics of the mass line campaign comport with those of intra-party campaigns in the last two decades. For example:

- The 2008–2009 campaign to study the “scientific development concept” was explicitly mandated in Hu Jintao’s work report to the 17th CCP Congress in October 2007. The Politburo authorized the launch of the campaign on 5 September 2008, and a five-day conference shortly thereafter laid out the campaign’s goals and procedures. A campaign leading small group was established under the leadership of Xi Jinping—then, as executive secretary of the Secretariat, in charge of managing the party apparatus, as Liu Yunshan is today—to run the campaign. The campaign was planned to proceed in three phases, working from central institutions through

provincial bodies to grassroots levels over an 18-month period. The object of the campaign was to “study and investigate” the “scientific development concept,” to deploy “democratic life meetings” to inspect adherence to the concept throughout the party and gain insight from “the masses,” and to bring about “rectification, improvement and implementation” on the basis of the concept. The Politburo Standing Committee itself kicked off the campaign with its own “criticism and self-criticism” in “democratic life meeting” reported to the full Politburo on 23 January 2009, and the Central Military Commission followed suit on 1 February 2009. Thereafter, Xinhua reported Politburo Standing Committee members fanning out to inspect the progress of the campaign in central organs and the provinces.

- The 2005–2006 campaign to sustain the “advanced nature” of CCP members proceeded in similar fashion, drawing authorization from Jiang Zemin’s work report to the 2002 16th Party Congress, the 16th Central Committee’s Fourth Plenum in October 2004, and a subsequent Politburo meeting. It was launched with the same top leadership send-off in Beijing, including self-criticism “democratic life meetings” by the Politburo and Central Military Commission, and proceeded over the following 18 months under the guidance of a campaign leadership small group supervised by Zeng Qinghong—then executive secretary of the Secretariat—and Organization Department chief He Guoqiang.

Authorization of the mass line campaign in the work report to the 18th Party Congress in November 2012 indicates that the campaign was planned well in advance and is not a surprise imposed out of the blue to serve Xi Jinping’s personal ambitions. The report to the congress—technically the report on the work of the 17th Central Committee—was delivered by Hu Jintao as the outgoing general secretary and drafted under Hu’s guidance, with Xi serving as chair of the drafting committee. Including the call for the campaign in the report almost certainly came with Xi’s approval and likely behest—as incoming general secretary, he would have to preside over the campaign in any case. But the report was a consensus document, reflecting acceptance by the entire outgoing and incoming Politburo leaders, all of whom reviewed it repeatedly before the congress. The campaign therefore cannot have been anything but anticipated widely within the party well beforehand, as well as evident to those outside the party who read the report.

Nor is the focus on the CCP’s “mass line” particularly Maoist, if by that term is meant Mao Zedong’s ideological views during the last two decades of his leadership. The 1981 CCP resolution on party history under Mao Zedong celebrated the party’s “mass line” as an integral part of Mao Zedong Thought, but the resolution also redefined “Mao Zedong Thought” as “the crystallization of the collective wisdom of the CCP” to which “many outstanding leaders of our party made important contributions.” Hagiographic treatment of Mao Zedong from the Yan’an rectification campaign in 1942–43 until his death in 1976 appropriated the mass line tradition as one more example of his unique and pioneering contributions to the universal storehouse of Marxism-Leninism, one of the many distortions in CCP history that the 1981 resolution sought to correct. In any case, according to party historians, the earliest reference to the “mass line” in CCP documents

appears to have come not from Mao, but rather in a Central Committee directive drafted by Chen Yi and approved by Zhou Enlai.

In this light, the mass line campaign launched under the new Xi Jinping leadership is of a piece in terms of goals and tactics with intra-party rectification campaigns of the past two decades, and not a startling throwback to the Mao years.

The Anti-Corruption Crackdown

Linked with the mass line campaign is a concurrent anti-corruption campaign run under the auspices of the party's disciplinary body, the CDIC, and the Ministry of Supervision under the State Council. The crackdown was foreshadowed in general terms in the 17th Central Committee work report delivered by Hu Jintao and in the 17th CDIC report to the 18th Party Congress. Thereafter, the campaign emerged into view roughly in tandem with the mass line campaign.

- On 31 December, the Politburo met to review the draft CDIC Standing Committee work report for submission to the 18th CDIC's Second Plenum, scheduled to meet (as in past years) in mid-January. Overlap with the mass line campaign was evident in the Politburo's linkage of the call to "improve party work style"—the mass line campaign theme—with the traditional priority of anti-corruption drives, to "build clean government and combat corruption." In calling for new efforts to inspect party discipline and root out corruption, the Politburo mandated enforcement of the 4 December eight-point regulations on party work style "as a routine." (Xinhua, 31 December 2012)
- At the CDIC plenum on 22 January, Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of enforcing the eight-point regulations as the "starting point and mobilization order" of efforts to improve party work style. "People's satisfaction should serve as the criterion for judging whether work style has improved...If the masses are not satisfied, rectification must promptly follow." (Xinhua, 22 January 2013) In his speech to the plenum, CDIC Secretary Wang Qishan amplified Xi's stress on the eight-point regulations and called for new efforts to "enforce party discipline, and particularly political discipline." (Xinhua, 25 February 2013)
- On 17 May, Wang Qishan convened a meeting of the Central Leading Group for Inspection Work (中央巡视工作领导小组) to organize central inspection teams for 2013. Wang serves as director of the group, and Organization Department chief Zhao Leji and CDIC deputy secretary and Secretariat member Zhao Hongzhu serve as his deputies. Wang called on the teams to "do a good job as the central authorities' 'detector'" and to hunt both the "tigers"—high-level targets of corruption—and the "flies"—lesser cases. Teams should focus on four categories of misbehavior: abuse of power for personal gain and other varieties of corruption; violations of the Politburo's eight-point regulations; violations of political discipline in disregarding central authority; and corruption in personnel appointments and promotions. (Xinhua, 17 May 2013)

- On 29 July, Xinhua reported that 2,290 officials have been sanctioned for violations of the Politburo's eight-point regulations.
- On 3 September, Xinhua reported the creation of a joint CDIC-Ministry of Supervision website. Among the website's features is a running list of investigations opened against officials suspected of corruption. Among them are included several high-ranking officials of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC, one of China's largest state-owned enterprises), and Jiang Jiemin, newly appointed director of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), the powerful body that manages the government's shares in more than a hundred of China's largest state-owned corporations.

In narrow terms of personalistic politics, it seems plausible that the high-level probes against the CNPC executives and Jiang Jiemin are ultimately aimed at Zhou Yongkang, the Politburo Standing Committee leader who supervised the internal security sector from 2007 until retiring in 2012 and who up through the 1990s rose to power in the oil sector. Whether that is the case, however, remains to be seen. The linkage of the mass line and anti-corruption campaigns under the call to "improve party work style, build clean government, and combat corruption" appears in any case to be aimed at clearing the way for new reform steps by the Xi leadership, both by intimidating opponents of new reform among various constituencies—"vested interests"—opposed to change and to improve the party's public image as it presses for what may be dislocating changes ahead.

To the Third Plenum

Persistently since the 18th Party Congress, Xi Jinping has stressed the necessity of new reform. Widely noticed in this regard was his early December visit to Shenzhen, where he paid homage to Deng Xiaoping and pledged new impetus behind reform. "China's reform," he said, has entered "a critical moment and a deep-water zone" of complexity and urgency. "We must bolster confidence, build consensus, make overall plans, and promote them in a coordinated manner." (Xinhua, 11 December 2012)

Subsequent commentary has amplified Xi's comments both on the need for reform but also with respect to its qualitative difficulty. The semiannual central conference on economic work in December 2012 and leadership statements at the 12th NPC in March 2013 reiterated expectations of new reforms. But they and associated lower-level commentary did little to illuminate the specifics beyond suggesting that the reform package should be comprehensive in addressing economic and associated government issues such as rebalancing in favor of a stronger consumption sector, distribution of income and wealth, the household registration (戶口) system and the urban-rural divide, changes in the financial sector, and breaking up monopolies by certain state-owned corporations in favor of a greater opening for private enterprises. Such comment has also acknowledged that such reforms will inevitably "touch certain vested interests" opposed to new reforms. The ambiguity regarding precisely what new reforms the upcoming Third Plenum will authorize, not surprisingly, reflects the intense political bargaining that must take place to establish consensus behind whatever steps will be announced.³

Beidaihe meeting

In that respect, the package of reforms likely dominated debate at the leadership retreat at Beidaihe in early August. The retreat this year appears to have met 1–14 August. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang stopped appearing in public on 1 August, and both reappeared back in Beijing on the 15th, indicating that the Beidaihe retreat was over.

In contrast to the past 10 years, PRC media acknowledged explicitly that there would be a Beidaihe meeting this year. (Zhongguo tongxunshe, 25 July 2013). There appears to have been a Beidaihe retreat last year, but it was not acknowledged in PRC media. From 2003, when the Hu Jintao leadership announced the discontinuation of annual retreats at Beidaihe, down to 2011—including in 2007, in the run-up to the 17th Congress—leadership appearance patterns suggest that there were no retreat in those years.

In addition, this year's retreat was something well short of a full meeting of the full Politburo. All six of the region-based Politburo members (including Beijing party chief Guo Jinlong) continued to appear regularly in their home bailiwicks. Also, Politburo Standing Committee member Yu Zhengsheng missed the first six days, embarking on an inspection tour of Tibet 1–6 August. After appearing with Liu Yunshan and Ma Kai in Beidaihe on 5 August to honor meritorious workers (an annual event since 2003 and not an indicator of a leadership retreat), Organization Department Director Zhao Leji left on an eight-day tour (6–13 August) of the heat-stressed northeastern provinces.

Renewed commitment to reform

Following the Beidaihe meeting, the Politburo convened on 27 August with a renewed commitment to reform. According to Xinhua's report on the session, the Politburo scheduled the Third Plenum to meet in November (a specific date will be set by the Politburo on the plenum's eve, if past practice is followed) and set as its agenda the addressing of "major issues in comprehensive reform."

The meeting underscored the Politburo's commitment in a fashion that suggested the relevance of the mass line and anti-corruption campaigns. "Stopping and retreating get us nowhere; reform and opening up must move forward without end," the Politburo resolved. It went on:

We must bolster the confidence in deepening reform, uphold the correct direction for deepening reform, build the consensus on deepening reform, pay attention to making overall planning for deepening reform, and conduct reforms in all fields in a coordinated manner."

Continuing, it added:

We must respect the people's originality, pool the wisdom of the whole party and the whole society as much as we can, widely unite all forces that can be united inside and outside the party, and fully mobilize all positive factors that can be mobilized inside and outside the country to form a great cohesive power for promoting reform; we must fully understand the

contradictions and difficulties encountered in reform, muster greater courage to advance with the times as well as overcome hard-hitting and difficult problems, be bold in tackling tough issues and wading through dangerous waters, and boldly break through the obstacles in ideas and perceptions as well as the barriers of vested interests. (Xinhua, 27 August 2013)

Notes

¹ This article has conformed to conventional English-language usage in employing the term “campaign” to represent the Chinese “活动,” although strictly speaking it should be rendered “activities.” See page 6 for further discussion of the implications of the different Chinese terms for the present campaign and for rectification campaigns in the Mao era.

² Translation modified from Open Source Center document number CPP20130618075001.

³ On this process and its prospects, see the article by Barry Naughton in this issue.