

The Trouble with Factions

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Recent Politburo discussion of the problem of factions in the Chinese Communist Party prompts assessment of the characteristics and conduct of factionalism in contemporary PRC leadership politics. This article offers a critique of how factional politics has been portrayed in analysis of leadership politics under Xi Jinping.

Leadership discussion of factionalism in the party emerged in Xinhua's 29 December account of a meeting of the full Politburo that day. The principal focus of the meeting was to review a report by the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC) on its work in 2014 and to examine arrangements for the work of rooting out corruption and promoting "party work style and clean government" in 2015. Party General Secretary Xi Jinping presided over the meeting, but Xinhua reported no remarks by him at the session. As conveyed by Xinhua, the Politburo, in calling for strict enforcement of party discipline in the coming year, declared that "banding together in gangs, forming cliques for private ends, or forming factions is not permitted within the party" (党内决不容忍搞团团伙伙, 结党营私, 拉帮结派).

The Politburo did not elaborate on the issue of party factionalism beyond that single statement, but a string of commentaries in the wake of the Politburo meeting did. On 3 January 2015, for example, a Xinhua commentary picking up on the Politburo meeting's reference to "gangs" delineated three such illicit groups. One was a "secretaries gang" of men who had served as the personal staff of disgraced Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang. Another was a "petroleum gang" of corrupt officials in the energy sector also linked to Zhou. And a third was a "Shanxi gang" of men whose corruption had pervaded that province's leadership and who were linked to Ling Jihua, formerly director of the sensitive Central Committee General Office.¹

On 5 January, a commentary on the CCP website stated that the "gangs" and "factions" that have so far been taken down are "not nearly enough." "Beneath the old tigers," it went on, "there are big tigers, and behind the big tigers there are foxes and rats. Where gangs form, there are also gang lords; where there are cliques, there are also 'mountain tops,' and these kinds of 'mountain tops' are very harmful to our party." Thus, it noted, the backstage leader behind the "secretaries gang" and "petroleum gang" was Zhou Yongkang, and the core member of the Shanxi gang was Ling Jihua. The danger that "big tigers" like these pose at the highest level of the party is exceedingly grave, it concluded.² Similarly, a commentary on 23 February warned that the cases of Zhou Yongkang, disgraced former Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Xu Caihou, and others indicate that such corrupt people are deeply embedded in the party and are not isolated examples.³

Finally, from 12–14 January, the 18th Central Discipline Inspection Commission held its fifth plenum in Beijing. As far as can be judged from Xinhua's excerpts, Xi Jinping's

speech to the plenum on the 13th did not explicitly mention the problem of party factionalism. But in its summary of plans for party discipline work in 2015, according to Xinhua's account, the CDIC did specify a focus on taking down gangs and factions as a core element in its foremost priority of enforcing party discipline.⁴

Yes, We Have No Factions?

Despite longstanding party prohibitions against factionalism, it is abundantly clear from PRC political history and from regime discourse that factions have been an inevitable and integral aspect of leadership politics since 1949. In March 1955, for example, State Planning Commission Chairman Gao Gang and Central Committee (CC) Organization Department Director Rao Shushi were evicted from the party for recruiting “a handful of followers” to carry out “anti-party splittist activities” over the preceding three years. In August 1959, PLA Marshal Peng Dehuai, former party General Secretary Zhang Wentian, and others were cashiered for forming an “anti-party clique” and pursuing a “right opportunist line.”

In May 1966, four members of the party Secretariat—Beijing city party chief Peng Zhen, PLA chief of staff Luo Ruqing, propaganda chief Lu Dingyi, and CC General Office Director Yang Shangkun—were purged as a “black gang” (黑帮) on the eve of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution itself party Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi and party General Secretary Deng Xiaoping were accused of forming a “bourgeois headquarters” which they led as “powerholders taking the capitalist road” (走资本主义路的当权派). In 1974, Mao himself criticized his wife Jiang Qing and three Cultural Revolution lefties as a “gang of four” (四人帮), a label deployed in official denunciations after their purge in October 1976. And the party's authoritative review of party history, adopted in June 1981, excoriated the “counterrevolutionary cliques” (反革命集团) of Jiang Qing and Mao's one-time designated successor (and alleged would-be assassin) Lin Biao for the national catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution.

After the early reform years, consistent with Deng Xiaoping's concerted efforts to restore and institutionalize party discipline, reference to factions disappeared from official discourse. Hu Yaobang's demotion as party general secretary in January 1987, for example, was not accompanied by charges that he had formed a faction. Nor was Zhao Ziyang's dismissal as party chief in the midst of the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, Beijing party secretary Chen Xitong's in 1995, or Shanghai party boss Chen Liangyu's in 2006.

Nevertheless, despite the regime's reluctance to acknowledge factionalism in official discourse even in its most spectacular moments, reference to all sorts of political associations have proliferated in broader Chinese political discourse over the same period. Popular discourse of party politics in the PRC and in the Hong Kong China-watching press during the early reform years commonly referred to the machinations of a “petroleum clique” associated with Politburo members Yu Qiuli and Kang Shi'en and of a “little gang of four” that was removed in 1980. In the 1990s, party General Secretary Jiang Zemin was routinely depicted as leading a “Shanghai gang” (上海帮) composed of associates from his days as party chief in that city. And cronies of former party General Secretary Hu Jintao are frequently referred to as members of a “Youth League faction”

(团派), stemming from their service in the Communist Youth League in the mid-1980s, when Hu presided over that body.

In China's popular media and in Hong Kong and Taiwan China-watching journals, factionalism has been the default framework for analyzing ongoing political dynamics in the Chinese leadership. There an unsystematic taxonomy of political associations populates accounts of what is going on in Beijing. This includes reference not only to a "Shanghai gang" and a "Youth League faction," but also to assorted "factions" (帮派), "cliques" (集团), "gangs" (帮 or 团伙), and "circles" (圈子), to mention a few.

Western Analysis of CCP Factionalism

Given so much to work with, analysis of Chinese leadership politics by observers in the West has long focused on dissection of party leadership factions. Broadly speaking, studies of PRC politics in the 1950s and early 1960s did not focus on factional alignments and conflict in assessing political trends in Beijing, partly because of impressions of Mao's unchallengeable power at the top, mirroring the position of Stalin in the USSR and replicating the presumed power of emperors in China's imperial era. Two events changed that approach. One was the fall of Nikita Khrushchev in October 1964, ending a long debate among Western Soviet analysts over whether he had attained the unchallengeable power that Stalin had seemed to hold and opening new assessments of Soviet politics based on premises of constant conflict among factions in the CPSU leadership. The other was the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, with its wholesale denunciation and purge of high-ranking party leaders and its polemics of a "two-line struggle" over power and policy.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Western observers sought new insights into Chinese leadership politics based on premises of factional conflict. These included not only reassessments of the years preceding the Cultural Revolution in such terms, but also ongoing efforts to interpret new events and trends, such as the 1971 Lin Biao affair, the 1969–72 opening to the United States, the leadership rosters emerging at the 1969 Ninth and 1973 Tenth Party Congresses, the 1973–75 campaign to criticize Lin Biao and Confucius, the 1976 purge again of Deng Xiaoping and the succession of Hua Guofeng to Mao Zedong in 1976, and Deng's re-emergence in 1977 and triumph at the 1978 Third Plenum.

In a Cultural Revolution context that seemed overwhelmingly to feature an ideologically driven politics and a struggle for power unconstrained by institutional routines, it was relatively easy to dissect factional associations, even in the arid and opaque output of PRC media in those days. Among the 21 members of the Ninth Central Committee Politburo appointed in 1969, for example, dissecting allegiances among four factions—a Lin Biao group of PLA (primarily Air Force) leaders, a Zhou Enlai faction of State Council leaders, a PLA moderate faction around Ye Jianying, and a Cultural Revolution-left group around Chen Boda and Jiang Qing—with Mao presiding over all was fairly straightforward. Table 1 (next page) shows this factional breakdown,

Table 1*The Ninth Central Committee Politburo*

<i>Lin faction</i>	<i>Zhou faction</i>	<i>PLA moderates</i>	<i>CR left</i>
Lin Biao	Zhou Enlai	Ye Jianying	Chen Boda
Ye Qun	Dong Biwu	Liu Bocheng	Jiang Qing
Li Zuopeng	Li Xiannian	Zhu De	Zhang Chunqiao
Wu Faxian	Xie Fuzhi	Chen Xilian	Yao Wenyuan
Qiu Huizuo	Xu Shiyou	Kang Sheng	

Factional analysis continued to serve observers well on into the reform era of the 1980s, during which policy trends seemed intelligible as the product of contention among leadership antagonists within the broad coalition of party veterans who dominated that decade. It seemed possible to identify a cluster of “liberal reformers” around Deng Xiaoping versus a group of “conservative reformers” around Chen Yun. Whether these constituted factions or coalitions or even looser associations was then and is still debatable.

Ideally, leadership factions could be sorted according to their respective motivations:

- *Ideologically based factions* rested on shared ideological commitments. Factional leaders and adherents thus acted as statesmen, motivated by common visions of what was good for China. Such leaders and adherents could therefore be characterized according to those ideological commitments, such as “conservative” or “liberal” or “moderate” with respect to how much and how far to reform, or as “Dengist,” “Chenist,” or “Maoist.”
- *Power-seeking factions* were built up in pyramids of patron-client ties and sought mutual protection and the rewards of power. Such factions might adopt ideological stances, but these were secondary, serving as instruments of the struggle to gain and maintain power, and so they shifted as political struggle required. Faction leaders acted not so much as statesmen but rather as politicians or Mafia chieftains in a context of constant leadership conflict. From that perspective, Mao Zedong had been capo di tutti capi, a position to which Deng supposedly aspired.
- *Bureaucratic factions* reflected the premise that where you stood on any given issue depended on where you sat in the political order. Factional leaders engaged in factional competition to sustain and expand the power, resources and turf of the specific bureaucracies they represented. In that regard, factional leaders acted not as statesmen or politicians, but as bureaucratic agents.

While factional groupings in the Deng era seemed clear enough, dissecting their nature using this typology was not always easy. In September 1988, for example, it was clear that a package of new wage and price reforms proposed by Deng Xiaoping and pressed by then party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang was defeated by a group of conservative reform leaders, including Premier Li Peng, Vice Premier Yao Yilin, and elders Chen Yun

and Li Xiannian, in favor of a period of economic retrenchment to combat surging inflation. Arguably, the group backing Li Peng could have been characterized as committed to preservation of the state-owned enterprise sector and the planned wage and price system associated with it as a matter of ideological commitment—their shared vision of what properly constitutes socialism. They may also have been bound together out of a common bureaucratic commitment to defend the state planning apparatus and associated enterprises, based on their long careers serving in that sector. Finally, they may have simply sought to block a major initiative of the new general secretary and weaken his patron, Deng Xiaoping, as a matter of power. These alternative speculations are not mutually exclusive, and conceivably something of each may have motivated the faction backing Li Peng.

Network Analysis in the Jiang and Hu Periods

Factional analysis since the early 1990s has seemed different from the unconstrained political conflict of the preceding Mao decades and even the moderated competition of the 1980s. For one thing, the lesson derived from leadership's evident divisions and consequent decision-making paralysis during the Tiananmen crisis of April–June 1989 was that public display of leadership disunity was damaging and even potentially lethal to the regime's ability to maintain power. A façade of unanimity therefore descended over the processes and policy-making of the party leadership that has been difficult to penetrate.

In addition, the efforts of Deng Xiaoping to restore regularized political routines under the authority of the party took firmer hold in the 1990s, establishing a matrix of increasingly institutionalized policy-making and leadership selection processes through which political competition proceeded under overarching collective leadership. Meanwhile, the generation of heavyweight revolutionary veterans who established the PRC and who dominated leadership politics over its first four decades passed from the scene, either through retirement or death. The succeeding younger generations of leaders lacked the veteran revolutionaries' credentials and relied instead on institutional authority. And finally, as the Deng-era reforms succeeded in stimulating the rapid growth of China's national wealth and power, the stakes in maintaining political stability grew apace. If permitted to recur, the free-for-all leadership combat of the last two decades of Mao's rule would have devastating consequences for large constituencies and interests in a far richer China.

In that context, factional politics appeared to evolve. The ideologically driven ferocity of revolutionary politics of the earlier decades gave way increasingly to an interest-driven competition that played out through the lattice of party and state institutions and processes promoted by Deng and his allies in the 1980s. The security-focused and ideologically driven factions hardened in the lethal politics of the Cultural Revolution gave way to looser interest-driven personal networks built on patron-client ties.

Foremost of these, of course, was the “Shanghai gang” led by Jiang Zemin, which included first Shanghai staff chief Zeng Qinghong, who arrived in Beijing soon after Jiang was appointed party general secretary in 1989, then Huang Ju and Wu Bangguo in

1994, and thereafter other leaders, some not from Shanghai specifically, such as Jiang Chunyun, Jia Qinglin, and Liu Qi. In the same period, Jiang's takedown of Beijing party boss and Politburo member Chen Xitong in 1995 on charges of corruption exposed another large network in the Beijing Party Committee with Chen as its head that had deep links into Beijing city more broadly.

Hu Jintao's network drew on associations with the Communist Youth League in the mid-1980s, when Hu led the body. Although members of what was popularly referred to as the "Youth League faction" (团派) emerged mostly among provincial leaderships during Hu's first term as party general secretary, they broke into the party's top ranks at the 2007 17th CCP Congress, when Li Yuanchao became a Politburo member and director of the CC Organization Department, and Ling Jihua took over the sensitive CC General Office.

The existence of such networks in the Jiang and Hu periods seemed beyond debate. But how they operated, what their nature and strength were, and how they influenced regime policy were rarely clear.

Analysis of Leadership Politics under Xi Jinping

Even more than in the Jiang and Hu eras, analysis of leadership politics in terms of contending factions since Xi Jinping assumed the post of party chief in 2012 has left more questions and apparent contradictions than it has answers. Factional analysis under Xi has suffered from three problems: lack of clear definitions; arbitrary and fungible delineation of factional associations; and poor explanatory power with respect to regime policy.

Definitional Issues

One issue that is rarely addressed, if at all, is the taxonomy of political associations that are lumped together under the rubric "factions." Judging just by the evidence exposed in the ongoing anti-corruption campaign, China's contemporary political ecology is populated by diverse species of groups whose bases differ, whose nature and strength of connections vary, and whose links into national politics are often obscure.

It is commonly asserted, for example, that "princelings" constitute a faction or that "princeling" status is an element in one faction or another. Such assertions raise the question of who is a "princeling." Is a princeling the son or daughter of one of the "eight immortals" among surviving veteran leaders of the revolutionary era—such as Xi Jinping himself, son of Xi Zhongxun? Does "princeling" status extend to in-laws, relatives, or second- or third-generation descendants of people like Xi Jinping? Some definitions of "princeling" are based on bureaucratic criteria. For example, a "princeling" is a son or daughter of anyone who served at the vice ministerial level or above in the political system. Even further, Hong Kong China-watching journals have compiled lists of thousands of "princelings" based on the criterion that anyone whose parents served as a cadre at county level or above is a "princeling." Factional analyses that deploy even more restrictive definitions of "princeling" status usually leave unexamined the question

of how much the offspring of the most august of revolutionary veterans actually share political outlooks and bond politically.

The Xi leadership’s prosecutions of Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou, and Ling Jihua have shed tantalizing light onto the corrupt behavior of high-level party leaders and their alleged henchmen. But thus far it is hard to see the coterie led by such leaders as more than clusters of kleptocratic politicians. According to surprisingly graphic presentations by Caixin and other popular media outlets, for example, Zhou Yongkang’s faction was composed of associates from his days as party chief in Sichuan, his cronies from his career in the oil industry sector, his family, his personal staff, and a small number in the security sector. How these groups sought mutual enrichment is clear enough. But how they operated as a faction in pursuit of power or to shape policy is altogether not.

Arbitrary Factional Associations

Assessing who follows whom in Chinese leadership politics in the post-Deng period has rarely been straightforward. But in the Xi era, faction-based analyses frequently rest on assertions of factional association that are tenuous, arbitrary, and at times peculiarly fungible.

For example, it is often asserted that Politburo appointments at the 18th Party Congress were a triumph for long retired party chief Jiang Zemin, counting six of seven leaders on the new Politburo Standing Committee, including Xi Jinping himself, as members of his faction, while only one—the new premier, Li Keqiang—is a crony of outgoing party chief Hu Jintao. Criteria for sorting leaders into factions, of course, vary, but the following attributes differentiating Jiang Zemin’s faction from Hu Jintao’s are commonly used:

<i>Jiang faction</i>	<i>Hu faction</i>
Princelings	Not princelings; common backgrounds
Origins or careers in coastal provinces	Origins or careers in interior provinces
Expertise and experience in finance and economic affairs	Expertise and experience in party apparatus, Communist Youth League (CYL), or propaganda

Now apply these respective criteria to the career of Liu Yunshan, currently the fifth-ranking member of the Politburo Standing Committee and supposed Jiang factional crony, summarized as follows:⁵

Born Shanxi, 1947. Commoner origin; not a princeling

- 1964–1993: Worked in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR)
 - 1964–68 Student
 - 1969–1975: Clerk, Tumed Right Banner Propaganda Office, IMAR
 - 1975–1982: Xinhua reporter, IMAR
 - 1982–84: Deputy secretary IMAR CYL
 - 1984–87: Deputy secretary IMAR CP & secretary, IMAR CCP Propaganda Department
 - 1987–1993: Member, IMAR CP Standing Committee

- 1992–93: Deputy secretary IMAR CP Standing Committee
- 1993–2002: Deputy director, CC Propaganda Department
- 2002–2012: Director, CC Propaganda Department
- 2002–2012: Politburo
 - 2007–2012: Member, CC Secretariat
- 2012–present: Politburo Standing Committee

Even a cursory assessment of Liu's career would seem to place him solidly in the Hu camp, not Jiang's. Liu hails from Shanxi and worked for the first three decades of his career in Inner Mongolia, neither of which has been a coastal province since Gondwanaland broke from Laurasia 180 million years ago in the Jurassic era. He has been a propaganda official from the start of his career down to his role on the current Politburo Standing Committee as head of the CC Ideology and Propaganda Leading Small Group. He also was a ranking CYL official in Inner Mongolia during the period of Hu Jintao's leadership of the national CYL. The only clue linking Liu to Jiang Zemin was that he moved to work in the CC Propaganda Department following the 14th Party Congress in 1992, when Jiang Zemin was general secretary. But he was promoted to director of the department and also added to the Politburo when Hu Jintao became general secretary. From this, it is unclear why Liu counts as one of six supposed Jiang cronies of the Politburo Standing Committee under Xi Jinping.

Other commonly asserted factional linkages seem highly debatable. For example, Li Yuanchao is widely held to be solidly a crony of Hu Jintao's. His career may be summarized as follows:

- Born 1950, Jiangsu; princeling
- 1974–1982:
 - Student; Shanghai Normal University graduate; student, then teacher, Fudan University
- 1983–1990:
 - Member, CYL Secretariat & secretary Shanghai CYL
- 1990–96:
 - 1990–93: Deputy director, CC Propaganda Department
 - 1993–96: Deputy director, SC Information Office
 - 1991–95: Student, Central Party School
- 1996–2000:
 - Vice minister of culture
- 2000–2007: Jiangsu CCP
 - 2000–2003: Deputy secretary, Jiangsu CP and party chief, Nanjing
 - 2003–2007: Secretary, Jiangsu CP
- 2007–2012: Politburo, Secretariat, & Organization Department chief
- 2012–present: Politburo & PRC vice president

On the face of it, there are strong reasons to associate Li with Hu Jintao. He served on the CYL Secretariat when Hu led the body. He was a student at the Central Party School when Hu was its president. He served as deputy director of the CC Propaganda

Department for three years after moving to Beijing in 1990. And he was appointed to the Politburo and Secretariat and took charge of the sensitive CC Organization Department in 2007, when Hu Jintao consolidated power at the 17th CCP Congress.

But there would seem to be equally strong reasons to associate Li with Jiang Zemin. He is a princeling and hails from Jiangsu, solidly a coastal province. He was educated and taught early in his career in Shanghai. His service on the national CYL Secretariat was concurrent with his service as chief of the Shanghai CYL when Jiang Zemin ran the city. And under Jiang Zemin he was appointed to the provincial party leadership in Jiangsu.

On balance, it seems plausible that Li Yuanchao is a close associate of Hu Jintao's. But it would seem equally plausible that Li has strong links to Jiang Zemin. Rather than presenting a simple dilemma of which faction to assign Li Yuanchao to, examples like Li suggest rather that there is something more fundamentally wrong about what factions are in leadership politics and how they operate.

Finally, consider the example of Xu Caihou, the former vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and one of the two highest-ranking PLA officers while serving in that post. Xu was appointed major general in 1990, in the first group appointed to that rank under Jiang Zemin's leadership of the CMC. He also became a member of the CMC as director of the PLA General Political Department in 1999, also under Jiang. It is broadly assumed that PLA generals are loyal adherents of the faction of the party general secretary and CMC chairman who appointed them to that rank. And so Xu is widely cited among external observers of leadership politics as a Jiang Zemin crony.

But battle-hardened veteran PLA-watchers almost uniformly question the validity of this assumption in an era when officer evaluation and promotion routines have been consolidated, and attach greater significance to the role of the PLA brass in determining selection at that level. At the same time, if Xu was indeed a crony of Jiang's, it raises immediate questions about factional politics. For example, how is it that Jiang's crony Xu Cahou was cashiered for corruption by Jiang's factional crony Xi Jinping? The same might be asked about the purge of Zhou Yongkang, the former Politburo Standing Committee member who was also often described as a member of Jiang's faction.

So What?

The last difficulty with factional analysis of politics in the Xi era, and perhaps the most important, is that it offers so little insight into policy-making and observable policy outcomes. Factional analyses appear largely devoted to assessing the balance of power in the top leadership, while discussions of policy are largely devoid of reference to factional power politics.

Specifically, factional analyses of the Xi Jinping era provide no insight into the major policy departures since Xi became party chief in November 2012: the 2013 Third Plenum's 60-point package of "comprehensive reform"; the 2013–2014 mass line education campaign and party work-style rectification; the ongoing campaign against

corruption; the creation of the State Security Commission and internet security leading small group; and the shrunken scope of permitted speech in broader society. Nor do they shed much light on political trends, such as Xi Jinping's enhanced media stature.

What Is to Be Done?

Whatever variant factional approach to Chinese leadership politics turns out to be effective, it will have somehow to complement and not distract from understanding of ongoing political initiatives and policy departures of the Xi leadership. A coherent picture of the origins and goals of these initiatives and departures emerges in straightforward fashion from analysis of major party documents and leadership speeches since the 18th CCP Congress.

The politics and policies of the Xi era were strongly shaped by the dilemmas confronting the leadership during Hu Jintao's second term (2007–2012) as general secretary. In Hu's first term (2002–2007), the leadership launched several major initiatives under the broad theme that Hu Jintao enunciated at the outset: "people-centered" (以人为本) policies. These initiatives included: the "scientific development concept" (科学发展观) in 2003; "socialist harmonious society" (社会主义和谐社会) in 2004; and building a "new socialist countryside" (社会主义新农村) in 2005. In contrast, no new initiatives emerged in Hu's second term. Instead, policy-making appeared to stagnate amid telltale signs of paralyzed leadership decision-making in the face of major economic, social, and political dilemmas. Such signs included:

- Stalled economic reform and creeping dominance of the state-owned enterprise sector in the economy (国进民退);
- failing coordination over foreign and security policy, apparent, among other areas, in Beijing's handling of its approach to the South China Sea;
- Premier Wen Jiabao's persistent complaints about the lack of progress in political reform; and
- lack of clear regime response to rising social unrest and the impact of new social media.

The 18th Party Congress was a place to address this leadership deadlock—to establish a new consensus behind reform, to authorize steps to break the resistance to policy change that had obstructed the last years of Hu's leadership, and to empower a new Xi leadership to pursue this agenda.

The party congress accomplished these things. Much of what has emerged under Xi's leadership since the congress was foreshadowed explicitly or implicitly in the work report delivered by outgoing party chief Hu Jintao at the congress. As all party congress work reports do, the Hu report was a consensus document, taking a year to draft, review, and revise. Xi Jinping played a key role in drafting the report, presiding over the drafting

sessions, but Hu Jintao presided over the process, and the broader Politburo and its Standing Committee repeatedly reviewed it. And the party congress also took steps to enhance the ability of the Politburo Standing Committee to establish consensus, reducing its membership from nine to seven.

After enunciating the overarching theme of “rejuvenating the nation,” Xi tipped the direction the new leadership would follow immediately after the congress. In his first trip as party general secretary, Xi traveled to Shenzhen, where he laid a wreath at a memorial to Deng Xiaoping on 12 December 2012 to inaugurate a new tide of reform. Also in December, Xi launched new drives to promote party work style and clean government—laying down the “eight-point regulations”—and to combat corruption. And in celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the 1982 PRC constitution, the Xi leadership renewed the party’s commitment to “governing the country according to law.”

What followed hewed closely to the line and steps set down in Hu’s report to the party congress. In the spring of 2013, the leadership launched the mass line education campaign, mandated in Hu’s work report and modeled after the intra-party study campaigns of the Jiang and Hu eras. In November 2013, the 18th CC’s Third Plenum adopted the 60-point program for “comprehensively deepening reforms” by 2020 (when China will become “a moderately prosperous society”), a formulation set down in the congress report. Many of the specifics of the 60-point decision were foreshadowed in general or precisely in the Hu report, including the establishment of the State Security Commission and reform of PLA organization. Similarly, the anti-corruption campaign pressed by CDIC Secretary Wang Qishan, which authoritative commentary has stated is aimed at breaking down “vested interests” that have impeded reform, drew authorization from the party congress. So also did the Fourth Plenum’s package of legal reforms set down in November 2014.

The political and party agenda the Xi leadership pursued in the wake of the congress thus could not have surprised anyone among the party elite involved in the 18th Party Congress and its preparation. The foreshadowing of much of Xi’s policy agenda at the party congress indicates that Xi has been pursuing a mandate bestowed on him and his Standing Committee colleagues to achieve the CCP’s 2020 goals and to address what authoritative party statements and leadership speeches have forthrightly called a crisis of governance facing the party. The coherence with which the Xi leadership has pursued this agenda itself points to this interpretation as well.

Xi’s enhanced prominence as party leader also comports with the effort to lend impetus to the agenda the Xi leadership has been mandated to press. While a great deal of personal attention has been attached to Xi in PRC media over the past two years, it has still stopped well short of the sort of personality cult that attached to Mao Zedong in the 1960s and that attached to Hua Guofeng during his brief tenure as party leader after Mao’s death. Xi is still operating well within the trappings of collective leadership that prevailed during Hu Jintao’s tenure as party chief. He has never been called the “core” of the party leadership collective, nor has he yet been credited with an ideological departure

as his own intellectual property. Xi is strong because he enjoys a powerful consensus among the broader party elite—active and retired—behind the agenda he is pursuing. How factional politics fits into this picture is not at all clear. At a minimum, the foregoing interpretation, if correct, suggests that whatever factional dynamic is at play does not cripple the ability of the broader leadership elite to establish consensus on policy approaches to the problems the regime faces.

The point is not that factions do not exist or that Chinese leaders do not seek to enhance their power. It is that factional competition is no longer the all-out free-for-all power struggle it was in Mao's later years. Instead, factional politics since Deng Xiaoping is increasingly an interest-driven competition that plays out within the increasingly institutionalized structures and processes according to broadly accepted norms and codes. Much of the factional analysis of the Xi era so far rests on presumptions and patterns derived from the Mao and early Deng eras. To that extent, it is fighting the last analytical war. The politics of the post-Deng era are substantially different—the stakes in a far richer and more powerful country are far higher and the consequences of political excess more damaging to regime survival. And so the concepts and methods of factional analysis must evolve with it.

¹ “反腐打掉的那些‘团团伙伙’” (Those “gangs” that anti-corruption has taken down), Xinhua, 3 January 2015.

² “党内还有多少帮派和山头?” (Are there still many factions and mountain tops in the party?), 中国共产党新闻网, 5 January 2015.

³ “反腐‘一阵风’那只是传说” (That Anti-Corruption is a “Gust of Wind” is just a myth), 23 February 2015, http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yw/201502/t20150216_51525.html.

⁴ “习近平：深化改革巩固成果积极拓展，不断把反腐败斗争引向深入” (Xi Jinping: Actively develop the gains of deepening reform and unceasingly deepen the struggle against corruption), Xinhua, 13 January 2015.

⁵ The career data for Liu Yunshan and, later, Li Yuanchao are drawn from the ever useful online resource China Vitae.