

# “Core” Leaders, “Authoritative Persons,” and Reform Pushback

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References in PRC media in recent months to China’s top leader, Xi Jinping, as “core” leader, and publication in May of a long dissertation on economic policy appearing in the Chinese Communist Party’s official newspaper under the byline “An Authoritative Person” have provoked controversy among observers of Chinese leadership politics. This article examines both of these episodes and offers judgments about their significance.

## Xi Jinping as “Core” Leader

In January this year, party leaders of several provinces began making statements referring to General Secretary Xi Jinping as the party’s “core” leader. These references prompted many observers in Hong Kong and abroad to conclude that Xi Jinping had achieved a stature that had been denied his predecessor Hu Jintao over his two terms as party leader. Xi’s designation as “core” leader was thus taken as a new measure of his gathering supreme power into his hands, rivaling that of Mao Zedong, the man who led the communist revolution of 1949 and who dominated PRC politics until his death in 1976.

The title of “core” leader was originally bestowed by Deng Xiaoping on Jiang Zemin, the Shanghai party leader who had just replaced Zhao Ziyang as party general secretary in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crisis in 1989. In a talk on 16 June 1989, Deng stated that “a collective leadership must have a core; without a core, no leadership can be strong enough.” After noting that Mao Zedong had been the “core” of the PRC’s first-generation collective leadership and that he was the “core” of the second generation, Deng declared that Jiang Zemin should be regarded as the “core” of the new third-generation leadership. “From the very first day it starts to work,” Deng concluded, “the new Standing Committee should make a point of establishing and maintaining this collective leadership and its core.”<sup>1</sup> Deng’s purpose was to strengthen the authority of a weak new general secretary selected in a context of crisis and emergency.

Thereafter, PRC media fastidiously used the formulation “the Central Committee with Comrade Jiang Zemin as its core” (以江泽民同志为核心的党中央) when referring to the Jiang Politburo leadership over his 13-year tenure as general secretary. When Jiang stepped down as the party’s top leader in 2002 in favor of his successor Hu Jintao, however, PRC media did not transfer the “core” leader designation to Hu, instead referring consistently to “the Central Committee with Comrade Hu Jintao as general secretary” (以胡锦涛同志为总书记的党中央). Some observers saw the change as reflecting Hu’s inability to consolidate his personal power in his early years as party leader. The new designation persisted across his 10-year tenure, even after Hu visibly consolidated power in 2007, however, and it appeared to this observer to reflect a decision to

underscore the collective aspect of the Hu Politburo leadership, with Hu simply as *primus inter pares*.

When Xi Jinping succeeded Hu Jintao as general secretary in November 2012, PRC media routinely applied the same collective leadership formulation used in the Hu era, referring to the Xi leadership as “the Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary” (以习近平同志为总书记的党中央). The appearance of references to Xi Jinping as “core” leader in January 2016, therefore, seemed to some observers to signal that Xi had consolidated sufficient power to dispense with the collective leadership formulation applied to Hu and assume the paramount leader status Jiang Zemin had enjoyed.

### *“Three Stricts and Three Honests”*

A closer look at the context of references to Xi as “core” leader leads to a more qualified conclusion about their significance. The references emerged in the context of a party-wide campaign to study and implement the “three stricts and three honests” (三严三实): the requirement that party members “be strict in moral conduct, in exercising power, and in self discipline and be honest in decision-making, in doing pioneering work, and in personal behavior.” The requirement originated in comments on enhancing party work-style made by Xi Jinping to the Anhui delegation to the March 2014 session of the National People’s Congress, and it became the focus of a new party-wide education drive in April 2015.

On 11 September 2015, a Politburo study session on the “three stricts and three honests” theme called for escalating the study campaign to a new level, mandating that party committees and party groups convene “democratic life” meetings focusing on it. Over the next three months, preparations for the new stage of the campaign were under way. On 21 September, Liu Yunshan, the Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of managing the party apparatus, convened a forum for leaders of local party units to set the goals and processes of the new stage of the campaign. (Xinhua, 21 September 2015) In early November, a Central Committee circular issued jointly by the party’s Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC) and the Organization Department stipulated that leaders of party bodies down through county level begin holding democratic life sessions on the “three stricts and three honests” in late December. In early December authoritative *People’s Daily* Commentator Articles (本报评论员) underscored the importance of the campaign’s new phase, and media reporting in November and December in several provinces reported leadership meetings to prepare for it.

On 28–29 December 2015, the Politburo led off the new stage in the campaign by convening its own “democratic life” meeting focused on the “three stricts and three honests.” (Xinhua, 29 December 2015) The only previous Politburo democratic life meeting in the Xi Jinping era was in June 2013 and led off the year-long study campaign on the mass line.

According to Xinhua, the Politburo meeting appraised the work of the “central leadership collective with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary” on improving party discipline

and work-style since its accession in 2012 as “solid” and as achieving “remarkable results.” The Xi leadership has curbed “formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance”—the four “undesirable work-styles” made a target by the Politburo in December 2012—and it has brought to justice “a large number of tigers and flies” under party discipline and state law. It has thus succeeded, the meeting concluded, in tightening the “institutional cage” on power and creating a “general atmosphere of corruption deterrence.” The meeting also authorized use in the “three stricts and three honests” study campaign of the examples of Zhou Yongkang, Bo Xilai, Xu Caihou, Guo Boxiong, Ling Jihua, and others brought down in the counter-corruption effort to underscore the point that the party spirit and discipline of party members do not necessarily grow over time but rather may deteriorate.

Xinhua’s account of the Politburo meeting made no reference to Xi Jinping as “core” leader. But in putting forward four requirements for the Politburo to serve as the model for the new stage of the campaign, Xi Jinping did mention one of four “consciousnesses” that in late January would become a major theme within which Xi as “core” was embedded. Stressing the requirement that the study campaign focus on rigorous implementation of central leadership decisions, Xi called on his Politburo colleagues to have a strong “consciousness of keeping in line” (看齐意识) and model for the rest of the party the requirement of “actively keeping in line with the party Central Committee as well as with the theory, line and general and specific policies of the party.” A *People’s Daily* Commentator Article the day after the Politburo meeting closed, entitled “The entire party must keep in line with the Central Committee,” underscored the same theme.

On 7 January 2016, Xinhua reported a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee that day to review work reports of the leading party groups of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, the State Council, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (the united front umbrella body), the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, and the Supreme People’s Court, as well as the party Secretariat. Although media reporting on current activities of the Politburo Standing Committee is exceedingly rare—usually in a context of the leadership responding to a major disaster—Xinhua reported a comparable meeting to review work reports of state and united front bodies in January 2015.

At its January 2015 meeting, the Politburo Standing Committee stressed that the party groups in all of these governing bodies must “take the lead in abiding by the party’s political discipline and rules and maintain a high degree of unanimity with the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary ideologically, politically and in action.” (Xinhua, 16 January 2015) In the January 2016 meeting, the Politburo Standing Committee intensified emphasis on falling in line behind the central party leadership beyond what it had called for the year before, calling on all party groups to “conscientiously protect the authority” of the Central Committee. It also called on the party to strengthen *three* consciousnesses—“political consciousness, consciousness of the big picture, and consciousness of responsibility” (政治意识, 大局意识, 责任意识). Xinhua’s account of the meeting made no reference either to “consciousness of the core” (核心意识)—a term that emerged in political discourse shortly thereafter—or to Xi Jinping as “core” leader.

*The Provinces Respond*

The first references to Xi Jinping as “core” leader emerged as leaders in several provinces convened meetings to discuss a new Central Committee circular conveying the results of and the requirements levied by the 28–29 December Politburo democratic life meeting and, in some later cases, Xi Jinping’s speech to the CDIC’s annual plenum on 12 January. Their responses showed variation, both with respect to the formulation regarding Xi and regarding the number and kinds of “consciousness” to be encouraged, as the following sample shows. Phrases cited hereafter in passages from provincial media reports relevant to Xi Jinping’s status have been italicized.

The Tianjin Municipal Party Committee led the way with a meeting on 8 January to convey the Central Committee circular and Xi Jinping’s speech to the Politburo democratic life session. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, it convened a second meeting presided over by Tianjin party chief Huang Xingguo to assess the circular’s importance for the city. The meeting stressed that everyone must “strengthen political consciousness, consciousness of the core, and consciousness of keeping in line” (政治意识, 核心意识, 看齐意识). The meeting also called on all party members to “protect the authority of the Central Committee and the party’s centralized unity, to resolutely protect *the core General Secretary Xi Jinping* (习近平总书记这个核心), and constantly to take the initiative to keep in line with the party Central Committee; with General Secretary Xi Jinping; with the party’s theories and its line, general orientation, and policies; with the spirit of the party’s 18<sup>th</sup> Congress and of the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Plenums; and with the various decisions and arrangements of the Central Committee.” Finally, it called on all Tianjin party members in both political opinion and behavior “to maintain a high degree of unanimity with *the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary.*” (*Tianjin Daily* 天津日报, 12 January 2016)

The Sichuan Party Committee also convened a meeting on the 11<sup>th</sup> in Chengdu to discuss the significance of the Politburo’s democratic life meeting and the “three stricts and three honests” campaign for party members there. Where the Tianjin party meeting stressed three “consciousnesses” to be encouraged, the Sichuan meeting emphasized four in upholding the Central Committee’s authority: “political consciousness, consciousness of the big picture, consciousness of the core, and consciousness of keeping in line” (政治意识, 大局意识, 核心意识, 看齐意识). In other respects, the Sichuan party meeting’s discussion paralleled Tianjin’s. “Strengthening consciousness of the core,” the meeting stipulated, means “upholding the authority of the Central Committee...and upholding *the core General Secretary Xi Jinping* (习近平总书记这个核心).” As Tianjin did, the Chengdu meeting called on all party members in the province to “maintain a high degree of unanimity ideologically, politically, and in action with *the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary.*” (*Sichuan Daily* 四川日报)

Jilin’s party committee convened a democratic life meeting on the “three stricts and three honests” campaign on 13 January. That meeting put forward six “consciousnesses” that party members in the province should sustain: political consciousness, consciousness of the core, consciousness of keeping in line, consciousness of the big picture, consciousness of discipline and rules (纪律意识), and public servant consciousness (公仆意

识). The Jilin meeting defined “consciousness of the core” as “consciously maintaining a high degree of unanimity with *the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary*.” It did not refer to Xi Jinping as “core” as Tianjin and Sichuan did. (*Jilin Daily* 吉林日报, 14 January 2016, as conveyed by Renminwang, 15 January 2016)

In Hefei on 13 January, the Anhui Party Committee met to study both the Politburo’s democratic life session and Xi Jinping’s CDIC speech. The meeting commended only one “consciousness”—of “keeping in line.” But it did refer to Xi as “core” leader in emphasizing discipline under the party’s central leadership. Only by developing conscientiously as party members, the meeting concluded, will it be possible “to keep in line with the party Central Committee, to keep in line with General Secretary Xi Jinping, to conscientiously protect the authority of the party Central Committee and to protect *the core General Secretary Xi Jinping*.” (*Anhui Daily* 安徽日报, 14 January 2016)

The Chongqing Municipal Party Committee convened a “special study meeting” on 14 January to study the Politburo’s democratic life meeting and Xi Jinping’s speech to it. Presided over and addressed by Chongqing party chief Sun Zhengcai, who is also a Politburo member, the meeting affirmed four “consciousnesses”: “political consciousness, consciousness of the big picture, consciousness of the core, and consciousness of keeping in line.” While calling on all party members in the city to “keep in line with the party Central Committee and with General Secretary Xi Jinping,” it did not refer to Xi as “core” leader. Instead, it called on party members to “preserve a high degree of unanimity with *the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary* and steadfastly comply with the centralized unified leadership of the Central Committee and resolutely protect its authority.” “Do your utmost to do what the Central Committee demands, do not do what it prohibits; it is not permitted to speak and act contrary to what the Central Committee demands, nor it is permissible to carry out only some of its orders and not others; neither is it permissible to suggest that upper levels have their policies but lower levels have their own counter-measures.” (*Chongqing Daily* 重庆日报, 15 January 2016)

The Beijing Party Committee spent an entire day on 14 January studying the Politburo’s democratic life meeting and Xi Jinping’s remarks. Presided over by party chief Guo Jinlong, who is also a Politburo member, the meeting commended five “consciousnesses”: political consciousness, consciousness of the big picture, consciousness of the core, consciousness of keeping in line, and capital consciousness (首都意识). The meeting called on Beijing party members to “maintain a high degree of unanimity with *the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary*.” The meeting stressed that China was at the critical stage of deepening reform to create a “moderately well-off society” and to avoid the middle-income trap, and so more than it ever needs “a resolute leadership core.” Therefore “protecting the authority of the party Central Committee is a demand of the times.” But the meeting did not refer to Xi as “core” leader. (*Beijing Daily* 北京日报, 15 January 2016)

On 15 January, Hubei party chief Li Hongzhong presided over a provincial party committee meeting to study both the Politburo democratic life meeting and Xi Jinping’s

speech to the CDIC Plenum. The meeting stressed that “the fundamental demand of political discipline and rules is to protect the authority of the party Central Committee and to maintain a high degree of unanimity ideologically, politically, and in action with *“the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary.”* Party members must “resolutely submit to the centralized unified leadership of the party Central Committee and steadfastly obey the orders of *the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary.”* “The Chinese Communist Party,” it continued, “is the leadership core of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the Politburo and its Standing Committee are the leadership core of the entire party, and *Comrade Xi Jinping is the leadership core* of the Central Committee,” it continued. “Conscientiously protecting the authority of the party Central Committee requires conscientiously protecting *the core General Secretary Xi Jinping,*” it concluded. (*Hubei Daily* 湖北日报, 17 January 2016)

### *Later References*

At a meeting on 29 January, the full Politburo for the first time endorsed four “consciousnesses”: “political consciousness, consciousness of the big picture, consciousness of the core, and consciousness of keeping in line.” In affirming the 7 January Standing Committee’s review of 2016 work plans of central state and united front bodies, according to Xinhua, the meeting observed:

The leadership of the Chinese Communist Party is the greatest superiority of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, and the key to strengthening the party leadership is to steadfastly uphold the centralized unified leadership of the Central Committee. Only if there is political consciousness, consciousness of the big picture, consciousness of the core, and consciousness of keeping in line and preservation of a high degree of unanimity with *the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary* ideologically, politically and in action will it be possible for our party to strengthen unity, strengthen its effectiveness, and from beginning to end be the strong leadership core of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics. (Xinhua, 29 January 2016)

The Politburo’s stress on the need to uphold the centralized authority of the central leadership prompted a second round of references to Xi Jinping as “core” in the first week of February, and now standardized references to “four consciousnesses.”<sup>2</sup> This wave, bigger than the first, included references in the media of several provinces that had already emerged in the first wave, but a few new ones as well.

A third, smaller wave of references in central media coincided with the National People’s Congress’s annual session in early March. For example:

- A long commentary in the party journal *Seeking Truth* (求实) credited “*the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary*” with putting forward a series of new concepts and strategies to achieve the “double hundred” goals (making China a moderately prosperous country by the CCP centennial in 2021 and a

well-off society by the PRC's centennial in 2049). "To develop the core role of the party leadership, we must first increase political consciousness, consciousness of the big picture, consciousness of the core, and consciousness of keeping in line; conscientiously keep in line with the party Central Committee; keep in line with General Secretary Xi Jinping; keep in line with the party's theories and its line, general orientation, and policies; talk politics; attend to the big picture; protect the authority of the party Central Committee; and at all times maintain a high degree of unanimity with the party Central Committee."<sup>3</sup>

- Premier Li Keqiang mentioned the "four consciousnesses" but did not refer to Xi Jinping as "core" leader in his report on the work of the State Council to the NPC on 5 March.
- At least *four* of the seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee (Zhang Dejiang, Liu Yunshan, Yu Zhengsheng, and Zhang Gaoli) mentioned the "four consciousnesses" in their remarks to panel discussions with provincial delegations during the NPC session. None referred to Xi Jinping as "core" leader.
- A Xinhua "insight" commentary transmitted in the agency's English-language service the day after the NPC closed observed that the "four consciousnesses" had been "a popular catchphrase" at the session, employed "not only by top leaders [and] national lawmakers but also commentators and news anchors." The phrase was significant because "a firm core leadership is crucial for laying down a top-level design under the current complex economic situation both at home and abroad." Stress on the "core," the commentary explained, means "adherence to the party's core leadership...especially its Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee" and "to unite closely around *the general secretary, who is the core of the core.*" "To ensure the huge Chinese vessel sails to the expected destination" [the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all aspects in the next five years] "every Chinese should paddle forward under the instruction of the helmsman—*the CCP Central Committee with Xi as general secretary,*" it concluded. (Xinhua, 16 March 2016)

References to the "four consciousnesses" and to Xi Jinping as "core" leader tapered off after March, but, as of early July, they have not disappeared. A long signed article in *People's Daily* on the eve of the party's 95<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary elaborated on the theme of the party as "the leadership core of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics," a staple of media commentary since the "three stricts and three honests" study campaign escalated in December 2015. "The basic demand of the 'four consciousnesses,'" the article noted, is "absolute loyalty to the party and maintaining a high degree of unanimity with *the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary* ideologically, politically, and in action, assuring that the party is united in will, united in action, and advances in step."<sup>4</sup>

Xi Jinping mentioned the "four consciousnesses" as a basic requirement in party work style in his speech marking the party's 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary on 1 July. Provincial party meetings marking the anniversary in some provinces went farther, repeating the

formulation regarding Xi as “core” leader that played out in the months since January. For example, Anhui party chief Wang Xuejun called on party members in the province to “firmly implant the four consciousnesses, unswervingly keep in line with the party Central Committee, keep in line with General Secretary Xi Jinping, resolutely protect the authority of the Central Committee, resolutely protect *the core General Secretary Xi Jinping*, and from beginning to end maintain a high degree of unanimity with the party Central Committee ideologically, politically, and in action.”

### *Xi Jinping as “Core” Leader?*

In interpreting the significance of the references to Xi Jinping as “core” leader since January, several points should be taken into account:

- Formulations applied to Xi Jinping have not been uniform over this period. There have been very occasional references, for example, to “the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as core.” But by far, the overwhelming majority of references have been to the requirement to protect the authority of “the core General Secretary Xi Jinping” (习近平总书记这个核心). The prevalence of this formulation in provincial media in January strongly suggests that it was incorporated in the Central Committee circular transmitted in early January mandating study of the 28–29 December Politburo democratic life meeting.
- Not all of the provinces picked up the Xi “core” formulation. As far as can be determined, 17 out of China’s 31 provinces did so. At least one—the 13 January Jilin example cited above—responded to the early January Central Committee circular but did not refer to Xi as “core.” Also, it appears that none of the five members of the Politburo who preside over provinces or province-level cities—Han Zheng in Shanghai, Hu Chunhua in Guangdong, Sun Zhengcai in Chongqing, Zhang Chunxian in Xinjiang, and Guo Jinlong in Beijing—has referred to Xi Jinping as “core” leader, either in their respective bailiwicks or elsewhere.
- All references to Xi Jinping as “core” leader thus far have occurred only in the context of strengthening party discipline behind the central leadership.
- The collective leadership formulation that has been standard since Xi took power in November 2012—“the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary”—remains so. There are no observed instances in which it has been replaced in authoritative comment—Politburo member statements, central party documents, or *People’s Daily* editorials (社论) or Commentator Articles (本报评论员)—by the “core” leader formulation paralleling that applied to Jiang Zemin (thus, “the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as core”) or any alternative “core” formulation.
- As the examples cited above show, references to Xi Jinping as “core” leader usually occur alongside the standard collective leadership formulation “the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary.” For example, in the *Hubei Daily* account of the Hubei party meeting on 15 January cited above, the



standard collective leadership formulation occurs twice in the same paragraph that also refers to Xi Jinping as the “core” of the leadership.

Taken together, these observations demonstrate that thus far Xi has not been named “core” leader in the sense that Jiang Zemin was. Instead, reference to Xi as “core” leader occurs in a more confined context of party discipline. Specifically, the references are a component of a larger effort to underscore the authority of the central party leadership in general against erosion by a broader party membership that frequently goes its own way and ignores or subverts the line set down by the top leadership.

It may be that current reference to Xi Jinping as “core” leader in a context of reinforcing the authority of the central party leadership will prove to be a stalking horse for ascribing to Xi the full-throated adoption of the “core” formulation that was accorded Jiang Zemin, perhaps at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2017. If so, we may expect to see reference to Xi as “core” leader appear in other sectors of politics and policy beyond the narrow party discipline context in which such references up to now have been confined. But so far, there is no sign of that.

### “Authoritative Persons”

On 9 May, *People’s Daily* published on its front page on economic policy under the byline “An Authoritative Person” (权威人物). The article at length rebuts erroneous views on the current state and trajectory of China’s economy and reasserts the economic judgments and policy line set down at the Fifth Plenum and central economic work conference in November and December 2015, respectively.

The appearance of the article triggered immediate speculation in China and abroad about who the “Authoritative Person” was. Majority opinion favored Liu He, the Harvard-trained deputy director of the State Council’s National Development and Reform Commission and formerly executive deputy director of the State Council Information Office. This surmise seems eminently plausible, given Liu’s current position as director of the General Office of the Central Committee’s Finance and Economy Leading Small Group.

Because Liu is widely believed to be personally close to Xi Jinping, some observers have argued that the “Authoritative Person” was speaking for Xi himself, who announced the “supply-side reforms” asserted in the article late last year. From that perspective, the article has been seen as strong evidence of a severe policy split in the leadership between Xi Jinping, who favors pressing forward with reform now despite the sagging growth rate of China’s economy, and Premier Li Keqiang, who is perceived to be pressing for short-term stimulus measures to sustain higher growth rates and postponing reform. The “Authoritative Person” article was thus a potent public criticism by the top party leader chastising China’s premier.<sup>5</sup>

That there would be serious debate and significant differences in the top leadership over economic policy seems altogether likely. There have been past episodes in Chinese leadership politics when such differences have been visible and have had major political

implications. In 1988, clear differences over economic policy were discernible between then party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang and Premier Li Peng, each with backing from senior party leaders. These differences played out through the summer and fall, leading to a major defeat for Zhao that weakened him politically in the months preceding the Tiananmen crisis in 1989. In the mid-1990s, there seemed to be differences over state-owned enterprise reform and WTO accession between party General Secretary Jiang Zemin and Vice Premier Zhu Rongji on one hand and Premier Li Peng on the other.

It is hard to believe that there are not differences among the top leadership these days, in fact, given the policy dilemmas the regime faces. Specifically, Chinese leaders almost certainly differ over how to reconcile implementation of the broad package of economic and other reforms promulgated at the Third Plenum in November 2013 that seek transition in the economy from an investment- and export-led pattern to an innovation-led and consumption-driven one with onset of slower growth rates in China's economy, referred to as the "new normal" in July 2014. However wide those differences may be, however, they have not prevented the leadership from arriving at major policy departures registered in the Fifth Plenum's adoption in November 2015 of a 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan for the years 2016–2020, the enunciation of new "supply-side" reforms shortly thereafter, the agreement on economic policy guidelines for 2016 at the central economic work conference in December 2015, and the endorsement of all of these departures at the NPC session in March this year.

So the question is: is the appearance of the "Authoritative Person" article evidence of a deep split in the leadership over economic policy? A number of observations invite caution in that regard:

- The "Authoritative Person" article does not look like a hit piece commissioned by one top leader against another. Judging by past episodes of leadership contention, attacks most often have come in the form of signed articles—often under a pseudonymous byline whose meaning hints at its aim—in *People's Daily*.
- The byline "An Authoritative Person" conveys the impression of authority, as an *authoritative* explication of the leadership line, rather than a viewpoint in an ongoing policy debate. Xinhua reported the article in its English-language transmissions, stressing that the byline is "usually used for high-level officials."
- The "Authoritative Person" article was endorsed by an editorial in the Hong Kong communist newspaper *Wen Wei Po*—a venue that sometimes offers more explicit accounts of what's going on in Beijing than appear in PRC central media—on 10 May. The editorial called the article a "a programmatic exposition" (綱領性闡述) of the central leadership's economic assessments and policy line and gave no hint that it was a partisan shot in a leadership debate.
- The views the "Authoritative Person" rebutted were attributed in the article to "some people" (有人) or to foreign media, not to "some comrades" (有的同志), as has often been the case in past episodes of leadership debate.

- As the *Wen Wei Po* editorial noted, the 9 May “Authoritative Person” article appears explicitly tied to the Politburo’s 29 April evaluation of economic trends on the basis of the first quarter 2016 results. Two previous “Authoritative Person” articles appeared in similar circumstances. The first appeared on 25 May 2015 and explicated at length the “new normal” policy implications of the Politburo’s review of first quarter 2015 economic statistics the preceding 30 April. A second “Authoritative Person” article appeared on 5 January 2016 and focused on the policy implications of the new five-year plan and the guidelines for economic work emerging from the central economic work conference in late December.
- Publication by *People’s Daily* on 10 May—the day after the paper’s publication of the “Authoritative Person” article—of a long, previously unpublicized speech on economic policy delivered by Xi Jinping to a seminar for provincial officials in January 2016 has been taken as signaling that the “Authoritative Person” article reflects the personal views of Xi Jinping in leadership debate. Its publication more likely is intended to underscore the consistency of the “Authoritative Person” article with consensus leadership views on economic policy and that the intended targets of its criticisms, given the audience of Xi’s speech in January, are officials at lower levels of the political system. Much of the attendant commentary on the article in PRC media discusses it in that light.

The upshot is that whatever disagreement may engage Politburo leaders over economic policy behind the scene, the “Authoritative Person” article does not seem a partisan attack in the ongoing debate. It appears more likely to reflect a concerted effort to rebut with authority mistaken understandings of what the consensus economic policy line entails and to chide officials and interest groups farther down in the political system who are attempting to distort or overturn authoritative central policy to their own advantage.

## Reform Pushback

Taken together, both of the episodes analyzed here reflect the Xi Jinping leadership’s priority on enforcing consistent implementation of its policies at all levels of the political order. The emergence of the “four consciousnesses” theme and the circumscribed ascription of “core” stature to Xi Jinping appear aimed at underscoring the authority of the central party leadership’s policies and enlisting compliance among a broader party apparatus that has been inclined to go its own way and to subvert central policy to its own interests. The 9 May “Authoritative Person” article in *People’s Daily* similarly appears to rebut “misunderstandings” of the leadership consensus on economic assessment and policy directions that seek to distort it in service to narrower interests.

The timing of these efforts to reinforce centralized authority is not fortuitous. The Xi leadership continually underscores the judgment that the party is at a “critical stage” in its efforts to transform China into a “moderately prosperous society” by 2020, the goal of the “comprehensive reform” authorized at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012 and set forth in the 60-point party decision at the Third Plenum in November 2013. The new five-year plan that emerged from the November 2015 Fifth Plenum and that was formally adopted by the National People’s Congress in March this year extends to 2020, and so plays a

central role in achieving the reform effort. The Xi leadership from its beginning has unstintingly targeted “vested interests” expected to push back against reforms, and stressed the need for “solid party members” who respect party discipline and comply with central authority. These latest episodes are of a piece with those priorities.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Urgent Tasks of China’s Third Generation Collective Leadership,” *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Vol.III (1982–1992), Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994, pp. 300–301.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis of the wave-like frequency of media references to Xi Jinping as “core” rests on systematic searches in the China Digital Library done by Alastair Iain Johnston of Harvard University covering the period from January through June 2016. I am grateful to him both for sharing his database and for discussing with me what all of this may mean.

<sup>3</sup> Qiu Shi 秋石, “不断开拓治国理政新境界” (Unceasingly open new ground in ruling the country and administering the government), *Qiushi*, 2016 No. 5, pp. 10–15. The byline “Qiu Shi” is a homophone for the title of the journal and underscores the authority of the commentary.

<sup>4</sup> Wen Yan 闻言, “党的领导是中国特色社会主义最本质的特征” (The leadership of the party is the most essential characteristic of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics), *People’s Daily*, 23 June 2016, p.7.

<sup>5</sup> For a carefully argued presentation of this position, see the article by Barry Naughton in this issue of the *Monitor*.