

How to Read Xi Jinping's 19th Party Congress Political Report

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Following longstanding procedures, General Secretary Xi Jinping will deliver a long political report at the Chinese Communist Party's 19th National Congress next fall. The report will set down judgments on the party leadership's work since the previous party congress in 2012 and set forth guidelines of the highest authority about the party's priorities for the next five years. This article offers suggestions about what to watch for in the upcoming report.

What the Political Report Is and What It Isn't

Under the party constitution, the national party congress is the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) most authoritative body. Convened every five years, a national party congress performs three basic functions: reviewing the work of the whole party over the five years since the last congress; laying out guidelines for party work in all major policy sectors for the next five years; and appointing a new Central Committee. Once appointed, the new Central Committee has the authority to act in the name of the party congress that elected it to shape policy and to make changes to the party leadership—normally at annual plenary sessions. In turn, the party's Politburo and its Standing Committee have the authority to make policy and personnel decisions on behalf of the presiding Central Committee.

The general secretary's political report to a national party congress is delivered on behalf of the outgoing Central Committee. It presents an accounting of the Committee's work over the preceding five years since the last party congress, and sets forth guidelines for future work in all sectors. As such, the political report to a national party congress is the most authoritative public recitation of party policy on all major matters.

A political report takes nearly a year to compose.¹ Soon after the November 2016 Sixth Plenum that put the 19th Party Congress on the party's agenda for the fall of 2017, if past procedures are being followed, a Politburo meeting has already appointed a drafting group, designated major topics for research, and authorized research teams to conduct investigation. Through the spring and early summer months this year, party groups within internal channels will review early drafts down through the provincial level of the CCP and in government institutions, the PLA, and select mass organizations. Meanwhile, the drafting group will meet with specialist research groups to incorporate the findings of their research. In late summer, several forums for party members and non-party groups in Beijing will review a near-final draft. At some point in this process, retired party elders will undoubtedly have the opportunity to kibitz and comment on it. Judging by drafting and review processes of past congresses, the laborious effort this time will prompt several thousand recommendations for revision in successive drafts.

By the time the political report is approved by the 18th Central Committee's Seventh Plenum the week before the 19th Party Congress opens this fall, it will have gone through several drafts and undergone successive reviews by the Politburo and its Standing Committee. The Politburo Standing Committee will meet a final time during the plenum to incorporate last-minute changes raised there.

If past precedents are being followed this time around, Xi Jinping is presiding over the political report's drafting group, with the Standing Committee member in charge of the party apparatus Liu Yunshan and Standing Committee member Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli as his deputies. Xi will therefore leave a strong imprint on what the report says.

But the report that Xi will deliver to the party congress will not be a recitation of Xi's personal views, nor should it be regarded narrowly as a Xi Jinping speech to the party congress. The lengthy and laborious process of its composition underscores that the political report is a consensus document reflecting compromise and negotiation among competing leaders and party constituencies, worked out through tried and true processes of bargaining, horse-trading, and inventing formulations sufficiently general to allow differing constituencies to elicit their own preferred interpretations. Thus, although Xi will have had the opportunity to place his own strong imprint on the document, it will be delivered in the name of the outgoing Central Committee and will reflect a broad leadership consensus behind it.

Format

In recent decades, political reports to party congresses have followed a similar format and laid out the same basic sequence of topics. The organization of the political report delivered by Jiang Zemin at the 2002 16th Congress is typical. Apart from the standard greeting to the assembled congress delegates and closing exhortation to support the party's cause, Jiang's report had 10 sections:

1. Review of work of the outgoing Central Committee
2. The party's prevailing doctrinal principles and new ideological elaborations
3. Enunciation of the party's basic goals for the next five years
4. Economic policy
5. Political reform
6. Cultural reform
7. National defense policy
8. Hong Kong-Macao and Taiwan policy
9. Foreign policy
10. Party reform

The two political reports delivered by General Secretary Hu Jintao to the 17th Party Congress in 2007 and to the 18th Party Congress in 2012 each included two extra sections. Both reports incorporated a new section of "social development" policy—education, labor issues, income distribution and urban-rural disparities, social security, health care, and social stability—that in Jiang's 2002 report had been folded into the sections on economic and political reform. These issues were a focus of Hu's

administration and a major element of the “people-centered” policy theme he enunciated at the beginning of his tenure in 2002.

The other extra section in Hu’s 2007 report was devoted to an explication of the “scientific development concept”—which Hu introduced into the party’s ideological lexicon in 2003—as the latest innovation in “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The “scientific development concept” was praised as “a continuation and development of the important thoughts on development advanced by the previous three generations of central collective leadership of the CPC and a concentrated expression of the Marxist world outlook and methodology with regard to development.” The devotion of a special section in the report on this topic was plainly prompted by the inclusion of the “scientific development concept” into the party constitution as part of the CCP’s “guiding” ideology, along with Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, “Deng Xiaoping Theory,” and “the important thinking of the Three Represents.”

Hu’s 2007 political report thus addressed the following 12 topics:

1. Review of work of the outgoing Central Committee
2. The party’s prevailing doctrinal principles and new ideological elaborations
3. The significance of the “scientific development concept”
4. Enunciation of the party’s basic goals for the next five years
5. Economic policy
6. Political reform
7. Cultural reform
8. Social development
9. National defense policy
10. Hong Kong-Macao and Taiwan policy
11. Foreign policy
12. Party reform

Hu’s 2012 political report added a section detailing party policy on ecological issues, reflecting a new focus emerging across Hu’s tenure. It thus addressed the following 12 topics:

1. Review of work of the outgoing Central Committee
2. The party’s prevailing doctrinal principles and new ideological elaborations
3. Enunciation of the party’s basic goals for the next five years
4. Economic policy
5. Political reform
6. Cultural reform
7. Social development
8. Ecological issues
9. National defense policy
10. Hong Kong-Macao and Taiwan policy
11. Foreign policy
12. Party reform.

In all of these political reports, the sections devoted to laying out guidelines for the party on substantive policy sectors—from the economy through foreign affairs—follow a standard Marxist-Leninist logic. The economy—strictly speaking, the “forces of production” and the “relations of production”—comes first because in Marxist-Leninist theory it is the materialist “base” of everything else in human society. Other aspects of society—social issues, political institutions, cultural affairs, etc.—form the “superstructure” derived from the economic “base,” and so follow the economy in the report.

Some Things to Look For in Xi’s Report

The judgments, conceptual formulations, and policy guidelines that party congress reports put forth are always general—sometimes abstruse to the point of bafflement—and their implications are usually implicit. Political reality demands that report formulations accommodate and cover differences on specific issues arising in the long process of the report’s composition, resulting in these generalities. At the same time, the formulations must allow for flexible implementation in diverse contexts after the congress closes. Statements in a political report are nevertheless set down with great precision: wording matters, even if the concrete significance of a formulation is not immediately apparent.

The baseline against which to judge a new congress report is the previous one. Some differences in characterization and judgment set down in a new political report compared to the report preceding it often simply reflect the changed circumstances the party has faced over the intervening five years. For example, the characterization of China’s international setting in the foreign policy section of Hu Jintao’s political report to the 18th Congress in 2012 took note of greater instability and turbulence in the international system than was the case in his report to the 17th Congress in 2007. Not surprisingly, this shift in description registered the eruption of the 2008 financial crisis and its global repercussions.

More strikingly, comparison of Xi’s report to the 19th Party Congress with Hu’s to the 18th—and, in some respects, with earlier ones—will reveal important underlying continuities in concept and party policy. For example, the section of Hu Jintao’s 2012 report on the party’s overarching goals for the next five years called for “comprehensively deepening reforms and opening” (全面深化改革开放) in pursuit of the party’s goal of establishing a “moderately prosperous society” (小康社会) by 2020. The goal of establishing a “moderately prosperous society” had originally been put on the party’s agenda in Jiang Zemin’s report to the 16th Congress in 2002. Hu Jintao’s report to the 17th Congress in 2007 strongly reaffirmed this goal, setting out “new requirements” for reform policy in the economic, political, cultural, and social sectors. Hu’s 2012 report similarly laid out reform goals for the economic, political and legal, cultural, and social sectors under the rubric of “comprehensively deepening reform.”

Not surprisingly, the 60-point decision adopted by the 18th Central Committee’s Third Plenum in November 2013 detailed some 300 reform steps in these policy sectors (and in the military and the party itself) in explicit response to the “strategic plan for comprehensively deepening reform” in Hu’s congress report. Subsequently, Xi Jinping described the Central Committee’s Fourth Plenum decision in October 2014 on legal

reform, its Fifth Plenum adoption in October 2015 of guidelines for a 13th five-year plan, and its Sixth Plenum decision of party reform as driven by the “strategic layout” of the “four comprehensives in deepening reform” in pursuit of the 2020 goal.

On this basis, this strong continuity in policy framework over 15 years makes it reasonable to expect that Xi Jinping’s report at the 19th Congress will reaffirm the goal of attaining “moderate prosperity” by 2020 and authorize a new push for reform in the final stage of pursuing it. The progress of reforms across the seven policy sectors called for at the 18th Party Congress and laid out in more detail at the November 2013 Third Plenum has been uneven. The advance of economic reform appears to have stagnated, in the eyes of some seasoned observers.² Steps in legal reform—with the adoption at the National People’s Congress session in March this year of a civil code, for example—and in the cultural and media sector suggest greater progress behind party goals. The far-reaching reorganization of the PLA in December 2015 was announced with considerable fanfare as advancing goals for military reform at the 18th Congress and the Third Plenum, but it is not at all clear how well that shake-up is faring. And so what this new reform push may entail—whether calling for altogether new steps or renewing effort behind ones still incomplete from the 18th Congress agenda—is anyone’s guess at this point. It is, in fact, likely a major focus of debate in the ongoing process of composing the Xi report.

Indications of New Departures

In addition to continuities, comparison of Xi’s political report with previous congress reports will also reveal important new departures, sometimes in ways whose concrete significance will become clear only later. For example, the section on party-building in Hu’s 2012 report stated that the party leadership “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 stated further, “to maintain the Party’s advanced nature and purity, we should carry out intensive activities throughout the Party to study and practice its mass line.” Hu’s 2007 report to the 17th Congress included no similar statements.

The import of these statements became apparent soon after the 18th Congress closed. On 4 December 2012, the Politburo adopted an eight-point decision addressing the faults in party work style that the political report had condemned, triggering a party-wide discipline campaign. Thereafter, in April 2013 a Politburo meeting launched a campaign to study and implement the “mass line,” an effort that worked its way through central, provincial, and sub-provincial levels of the party before winding down in September 2014.

In its discussion of “social management,” Hu’s 2012 political report stipulated that the party leadership “should improve the national security strategy and its work mechanism, and keep high vigilance against and resolutely forestall separatist activities and activities of infiltration and subversion carried out by hostile forces, so as to ensure national security.” Here the report’s reference to a national security “work mechanism” foreshadowed the establishment of the State Security Commission mandated in the

November 2013 Third Plenum's 60-point decision and announced two months later in terms that echoed the political report's concerns over "separatist activities and activities of infiltration and subversion carried out by hostile forces."

As a final example, the discussion of the party's prevailing ideological principles in Xi's report to the 19th Congress may provide a tip indicating that the congress will revise the party constitution to incorporate new doctrines devised by the Xi leadership as components of the party's guiding ideology. In Jiang Zemin's political report to the 16th Congress, the section discussing the party's principles thus foreshadowed the enshrinement of the "Three Represents" in the party constitution's preamble. The "important thinking of the Three Represents," it noted, is "a continuation and development of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory" and "the crystallization of the Party's collective wisdom and a guiding ideology the Party must follow for a long time to come."

Similarly, the comparable section of Hu Jintao's report to the 17th Congress in 2007 foreshadowed the incorporation of the "scientific development concept" into the party constitution, stating that:

The Scientific Outlook on Development is a continuation and development of the important thoughts on development advanced by the previous three generations of central collective leadership of the CPC and a concentrated expression of the Marxist world outlook and methodology with regard to development. It is a scientific theory that is in the same line as Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and the important thought of Three Represents and keeps up with the times. It is an important guiding principle for China's economic and social development and a major strategic thought that we must uphold and apply in developing socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Public statements by the Xi leadership and commentary in PRC media thus far have given no clear indication that the party constitution will incorporate a new development to the party's guiding principles alongside the current formulation "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thinking of the Three Represents, and the scientific development concept." As widely speculated, a speech delivered by party General Office director and Politburo member Li Zhanshu in February this year and published only in May, describing concepts laid out in Xi Jinping's speeches as a "complete theoretical system," may serve as a stalking horse for such a constitutional revision.³ Li's statement stops short, however, of suggesting that such a "theoretical system"—under whatever conceptual label may be attached to it—merits incorporation as part of the party's enduring "guiding ideology." In that regard, Xi's congress report may provide the first tip.

Conclusion

Political reports to national party congresses are long—Hu Jintao's report to the 18th Party Congress in 2012 ran to nearly 30,000 characters in Chinese and over 22,000 words

in English translation. They are also cast in the CCP's finest ideological jargon and in formulations crafted of sufficient generality as to confound clarity. If Homer nods, then even more readily reports to party congresses may induce napping.

But dismissing them as empty exercises in party jargon and rhetorical ritual misses their importance in communist politics. Careful scrutiny and patient analysis of Hu Jintao's political report to the 18th Party Congress in 2012 shows how much of Xi Jinping's policy agenda during his first term as general secretary was authoritatively set down in the party consensus that informed Hu's report. The same analytical approach to the political report that Xi will deliver on behalf of the 18th Central Committee to the 19th Congress this fall will shed comparable light on his priorities in his second term.

Notes

¹ For details on the process of composing past political reports to party congresses, see "The Road to the 19th Party Congress," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 51 (Winter 2017).

² See, for example, Barry Naughton, "Xi Jinping's Economic Policy in the Run-Up to the 19th Party Congress: The Gift to Donald Trump," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 52 (14 February 2017).

³ "The Big Message behind the Making of Xi Jinping's Political Philosophy," *South China Morning Post Online*, 1 May 2017; and *People's Daily Overseas Website* (人民日报海外网), 1 May 2017.