

A Cadre by Any Other Name Would Smell as Sweet? Domestic Policy Trajectory after the 19th Party Congress

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In advance of the leadership reshuffle this fall, with five of seven Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) members expected to vacate their seats, observers' focus is trained on the top candidates for advancement and the intense competition between them. Yet little is known of any given politician's personal policy preferences, leaving us unable to estimate how his elevation might influence the development or implementation of domestic policy. In the absence of such information, this article offers a framework for projecting the policy trends that are likely to continue on no matter who finds his way to the PBSC.

Farewell [Insert Name Here], We Hardly Knew Ye

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and observers around the globe are gearing up for the approaching party congress, an event that promises to be, like its recent predecessors, both platitudinous and revealing. Many people are quite reasonably focused on the drama of upcoming personnel shuffles, especially given the rather juicy news that formerly presumptive PBSC member Sun Zhengcai is under investigation for “serious violations of discipline.”¹ Sun's sudden tumble from the ladder up to the PBSC has been interpreted as yet another move by Xi Jinping to consolidate his power in advance of the party congress, buck tacit leadership promotion norms, and put his own people in place for the next five years (and beyond, if certain observers' predictions are true).² Yet, given the lack of reliable insider information emanating from Beijing (for better and for worse, Zhongnanhai does not offer up the free-flow of leaks that the current White House does), it is difficult at the moment to say why exactly Sun was axed and how it will affect the composition of the next PBSC.

Sun's downfall does lead to another important question, however: How does this altered PBSC lineup affect the general policy trajectory of the CCP, and therefore of China? Looking specifically at domestic social policy, how can we determine what the next set of leaders will aim to accomplish in the cultural, legal, and ideological spheres?

If recent history is any guide, we are unlikely to learn much by parsing particular leaders' résumés for hints of their underlying policy preferences. Hu Jintao was seen in many quarters as a potential “reformer” before he became general secretary, though his administration's treatment of dissidents, and its slow and steady tightening of media and cultural controls, showed that he did not fit this label as it was intended.³ Was Hu a reformer at one time, whose thinking was reshaped over his years within the system? Did leading all of China call for a mindset fundamentally different from that which Hu

^{*}The opinions and characterizations in this paper are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent official positions of the United States government.

possessed in his previous positions in the Communist Youth League, and as party secretary of Guizhou and Tibet? Or was the entire notion of his “reformist” nature something imposed from the outside, a chimera? We don’t know.

The mystery surrounding leaders’ truest thoughts is, of course, by design. No government that dispatches functionaries to find and secure all stray photographs of a politician’s childhood is likely encourage individual leaders to speak their minds in public.⁴ And while Xi Jinping’s background is more fleshed out (with more photographs) than Hu’s had been, it is no less tightly controlled as part of the party’s narrative, and it offers no more real insight into his personal policy desires than did Hu’s. Indeed, before Xi’s administration began in earnest, some speculated that he might take a gentler line on Tibet (based on the fact that Xi’s father wore a watch given to him by the Dalai Lama, and the fact that Xi’s wife is a Buddhist).⁵ Instead, the past few years have seen the government’s merciless pursuit of Tibetan self-immolators and their families while expanding the “grid” surveillance system.⁶

International coverage of leadership turnovers rarely offers up suggestions as to the specific policy druthers of top leaders, particularly members of the PBSC (excepting the general secretary and premier), who seem to be described primarily in terms of their connections to other senior leaders.⁷

This is indeed due in large part to the superlative job the CCP has done at effacing hints of any given cadre’s individual thoughts and beliefs. It also means that, as Kerry Brown recently noted, English-language discussion of the party congress, and of Chinese leadership more generally, “focus[es] on personnel, factions, and human agency, rather than on the more abstract, elusive issues of what ideas matter, and which are becoming more dominant.”⁸ There are surely both policy-related *and* personal feuds happening within the walls of Zhongnanhai, and they are surely intertwined in some cases. Media coverage tends to focus on the latter, which—whether the latest gossip is accurate—does not generally offer insight into policy outcomes. A focus on the former might in theory offer more insight, but in the reality of the tightly controlled PRC media environment, such a focus will not be brought to bear any time soon.

All of this is to say that no matter which men (and they are always men) end up on the red carpet this fall, what little we know of their personal identities won’t offer us many clues as to their domestic policy preferences. If we don’t have a way to tie certain policies to certain people, is there another means of projecting where China’s domestic social policies are headed? If we turn our minds to the more “abstract, elusive” idea of ideas, what are the domestic policy through-lines we can expect to see in the next five years, regardless of who sits on the PBSC?

Mystery Men and Policy Priorities

We are left to divine likely policy choices through the CCP’s past actions and stated intentions. Thus, when wading through the mire of official documents and declarations, it is helpful to have an overall framework in which to contextualize, for example, the latest effort to “enrich and develop Socialist art and literature.”⁹ Drawing a blueprint of

the party's underlying motivations allows us to make educated guesses about the policy-related intentions for any given edict or bit of legislation—and project what priorities are likely to remain dominant over time—rather than having to fall back on purely personal explanations.

An obvious baseline for this framework is the truism that the CCP's deepest motivation is to stay in power. Taking this as our premise suggests three follow-on priorities: safeguarding the PRC as an intact entity to be able to rule over; ensuring that no other centers of power coalesce to challenge unipolar party supremacy; and preventing public discontent so widespread that it could upend the system from below.

These basic priorities have not changed much, if at all, in the years since reform and opening. What have changed are the conditions, both internal and external, that must be met to achieve them. As Emily Parker recently told the *New York Times* in response to the PRC's apparent test run of particular censorship capabilities, "It does appear the [online] crackdown is becoming more intense, but the internet is also more powerful than it has ever been. Beijing's crackdown on the internet is commensurate with the power of the internet in China."¹⁰ Similarly, changes in all aspects of China's domestic and international reality demand commensurate changes in policy response.¹¹

- China in 2017 has had decades of ever-increasing contact and interdependence with the rest of the world that have altered its citizens' understanding of themselves and their country. The PRC's international influence has risen significantly, along with its presumption that China's own domestic priorities should be respected even outside its borders. The brief time that Donald Trump has been president of the United States has likely made China's claims to a superior model of governance even more convincing to its people.
- A growing proportion of China's citizenry possess the heightened expectations of a middle class, and have experienced decades of increasing personal freedom. No longer satisfied simply with having enough to eat, these individuals want their government to address issues such as degradation and food and medicine safety.¹² Concerns about the rich-poor gap bespeak a more general anxiety about the fairness of Chinese society today.
- Growing proportions of the country's population—and its leaders themselves—had no personal experience with the founding and forging of the People's Republic, connoting a fundamentally different relationship between the governing and the governed. Traditional cultural value systems were forcibly uprooted and replaced with Maoism, but nothing has truly replaced the absence of either in the reform era.
- The corruption inherent in any ruling system, and particularly in an authoritarian system, has eaten away at the underpinnings of popular legitimacy.¹³ Perhaps even more alarmingly, this rot has eroded the willingness of local cadres to carry out orders from the center and weakened even the top leadership's commitment to the survival of the CCP relative to the fulfillment of personal ambitions.
- Externally, the Color Revolutions of the aughts and the Arab Spring in the early 2010s (as well as China's own abortive Jasmine Revolution) served as deafening

warnings of the collapse that could come if the CCP were too inattentive to its population's needs, too lax in its treatment of nascent political threats, or too heedless of what it perceived as foreign meddling.

- All this has of course taken place alongside the creeping penetration of internet technology into all corners of political and social life.

A number of these factors have both positive and negative aspects from the party's perspective. For example, younger generations may not personally remember events that the CCP would rather erase from its history, such as the Great Leap Forward or the protests in Tiananmen Square, making it easier to maintain official control over public discussion and understanding of these events. At the same time, these young people also lack a personal memory of a much poorer China, meaning their frame of reference for material and personal success is based on the increasing wealth they see around them rather than a hardscrabble past—raising expectations about their livelihoods and lifestyles in ways that are more complicated for the government to fulfill. (This sense of relative deprivation also helps us when considering terms such as *loser* (屌丝) and *white-rich-beautiful/tall-rich-handsome* (白富美/高富帅) that have become popular in recent years as young people define themselves by and against current standards of wealth and success rather than seeing themselves as wildly successful compared to their parents' or grandparents' generation.)¹⁴

Though they certainly do not serve as a crystal ball, this set of needs and conditions can be helpful in making educated guesses about where domestic Chinese policy is likely to go. For example, absent any other reliable information, the motivations and conditions described above signal that the anti-corruption campaign has roots deeper than Xi's shallow desire for self-aggrandizement and personal power. (It does not, of course, preclude Xi having such desires.) Rather than predicting that the anti-corruption campaign would die down once the initial waves had convulsed through the system and Xi felt reassured that his position was stable, this set of conditions would have suggested something more akin to the long-lived campaign we're currently seeing.

So what are the domestic policy through-lines we can expect to continue given this set of needs and the array of specific conditions under which they must be met?¹⁵

Party loyalty and discipline at the center, rather than the fringes, of domestic policy planning. Unless one is absolutely convinced that the only purpose of the anti-corruption campaign is the continued purging of Xi Jinping's enemies, there is no reason to think that party discipline efforts will flag significantly in his second term. Within the constraints it has placed on itself—including reliance on a watchdog entity that is embedded in the structure it is supposed to police—the CCP seems determined to root out as many disloyal and corrupt cadres as possible. This effort underpins all others. Without a governing corps that has some measure of legitimacy among those it governs, that more or less faithfully implements the policies envisioned at the top, and that accepts the party's strictures on public politicking, none of the other policy priorities have much hope of succeeding.

Sincere and focused (if not always successful) efforts to recognize and ameliorate the middle class's most pressing concerns. If the CCP hopes to continue thwarting the rise of alternative sources of legitimacy and the diffusion of regime-threatening discontent, it has to deliver the goods as an adequately responsive government. This is most critical in relation to those citizens with the highest potential to destabilize the foundations of the regime: otherwise apolitical beneficiaries of China's economic success who nonetheless could form a credible threat if mobilized en masse. This can be seen in, among other examples, the increased pace and amount of regulations relating to environmental protection in recent years, as well as efforts such as the China Food Product Rumor-Refuting Alliance.¹⁶ It is also evident in Beijing's push to be a "Rule of Law Country": the party-state must be seen as creating and (more or less) abiding by a fair set of rules if it hopes to retain popular buy-in to its permanent rule.¹⁷

Brutal, reflexive suppression of anyone found testing the boundaries of the politically possible, even in seemingly "safe" ways. This means that those individuals or groups who are aligned with party aims—anti-corruption, or environmental protection, say—cannot advocate for these causes if it even indirectly challenges the system in which they operate. This is the corollary of the previous point: the CCP may be working to improve Chinese citizens' lives, including allowing much more personal freedom than had been imaginable 40 years ago, but it must also be the sole entity enacting or legitimizing changes to social policies and systems. One might imagine the post-reform-and-opening CCP as changing its fundamental citizen-management strategy from a "stay inside the fence" approach (in which citizens could go wherever they wanted within the sociopolitical walls the party-state had erected) to a "keep off the grass" approach (in which citizens can go almost anywhere they want, save a specific walled-off area). To make this approach effective and indeed keep citizens off the grass, the penalties must be credibly harsh. Even if the vast majority of the population has no interest in this forbidden zone, those who do must know that even gentle challenges to certain aspects of the regime can engender a crushing response. We have certainly seen this crushing response both in its targets (Liu Xiaobo and the "709 Lawyers," to name only the most prominent cases) and in its methods (e.g., televised confessions).¹⁸

Selective and somewhat awkward efforts to channel or even stanch the flow of international intercourse. This barrier, of course, cannot be absolute, for both practical and theoretical reasons. Presuming that China could not and would not want to become a larger version of North Korea, it cannot cut its population off from the world in a comprehensive way. It must also not cause too much anger among a population that is used to watching *The Big Bang Theory* and taking vacations to Europe. Yet it is difficult to ignore the preponderance of evidence that the PRC is increasingly willing to accept very real political and economic costs in order to keep a tighter grip on the foreign influences that are reaching its shores. The Foreign NGO Law, recent regulations on VPN use, and the Cybersecurity Law are all manifestations of this trend.¹⁹

The active development of a positive definition of "China," as a center of gravity for citizens' notions of what it means to be Chinese and as inoculation against inevitable encounters with competing theories of governance. This vision is "positive" in the sense

that it is meant to fill a void, a “negative,” created after decades of the party-state disfavoring or even eradicating traditional cultural and political norms. The CCP is attempting to define modern Chinese identity that goes beyond the callow “to get rich is glorious.” This can be seen in a hodgepodge of government efforts to direct the development of culture (itself a strange construction), the revival of Confucianism, and in the promotion of “core socialist values.”²⁰ Of course, there is a component of this effort that involves questioning the validity of other countries’ models or lack thereof—embodied by the cartoon contrasting U.S., British, and Chinese leadership selection systems—but the creation of a meaningful sense of what China *is* is essential to the modern Chinese governance project.²¹

Tireless efforts to assert greater control over all manner of media and communication tools. This is also a prerequisite to many of the other agenda items. The party cannot hope to effectively manage foreign contact, expunge dissonant messages, or promote its own narrative without dominating all media for communication. There are a number of obvious components to this, like not allowing social media to be used as an organizational tool for open revolt, a la Arab Spring, or reining in virtual private networks to suppress foreign or otherwise subversive content. But an important purpose to the party’s constant patrolling of cyberspace is also to prevent the emergence of alternate sources of legitimacy, centers of popular power that could potentially undermine the CCP. This was likely a major component of the drive to silence “Big V’s” on Sina Weibo back in 2013.²²

Governing in the Land of the High-Hanging Fruit

The agenda laid out in Hu Jintao’s report to the 18th Party Congress, which has provided the template for the efforts outlined above, was that of a government trying to wrap its hands around an increasingly complex and difficult set of domestic policy choices.²³ During the first few decades of reform and opening, the party-state oversaw tremendous growth in part by allowing the Chinese economy and society to refoliate themselves after being stunted during the Mao era. By 2012, it was clear that this approach was no longer enough: all the low-hanging policy fruit had been plucked. In working toward its goal of “building a moderately prosperous society” by 2020, the CCP has made a great contribution to the world in terms of poverty alleviation, but this progress comes with a new set of challenges simply because more and more Chinese now have something to lose when any given policy choice doesn’t go their way. Many of the decisions that the party must make now are fraught with unpleasant trade-offs that can spark public discontent. A recent protest in Shanghai is a case in point: in an attempt to dampen property speculation, the city issued measures restricting the use of commercially-zoned property for residential purposes. After demonstrators took to the street to voice their opposition, the city partially relented by allowing buyers of such “dual-use” properties to move in to their homes.²⁴

Despite the dangers inherent in the challenges facing the CCP—and public expressions of discontent with its decisions—it is important to remember that most Chinese say they are happy with the way things are going in China.²⁵ If the party can maintain this general level of public satisfaction while navigating the difficult policy choices that lie ahead, it

will be doing quite well for itself. Outside observers often focus on the portion of the population that is unhappy with the regime's policies (and rightfully so, given that some of these individuals are unable to freely express their discontent at home). Yet the party-state does not need to satisfy everyone in order to maintain its place in Zhongnanhai. Though the mechanisms for a change in ruling party are, by design, much more dramatic in China than in democratic nations, the governing strategy can essentially be boiled down to the same thing: the CCP just needs to keep *enough* of the people happy *enough* of the time.

Notes

¹ “孙政才同志涉嫌严重违纪 中共中央决定对其立案审查” (Comrade Sun Zhengcai suspected of serious discipline violations; the CCP Central Committee decides to open investigation on him), Xinhua, July 24, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-07/24/c_1121372319.htm.

² “A potential successor to Xi Jinping is purged,” *Economist*, July 20, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/china/21725338-would-he-prefer-have-no-heirs-apparent-potential-successor-xi-jinping-purged>; and Chris Buckley, “From Political Star to ‘a Sacrificial Object’ in China,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/22/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-sun-zhengcai-chongqing.html>.

³ Jonathan Watts, “Civil liberties crackdown casts long shadow over Chinese leader's visit to Britain,” *Guardian*, September 12, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/13/topstories3.china>; Michael Wines, Sharon LaFraniere, and Jonathan Ansfield, “China’s Censors Tackle and Trip Over the Internet,” *New York Times*, April 7, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/08/world/asia/08censor.html>; Heidi Blake, “China hijacks internet traffic: timeline of Chinese web censorship and cyber attacks,” *Telegraph*, November 18, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8142328/China-hijacks-internet-traffic-timeline-of-Chinese-web-censorship-and-cyber-attacks.html>; and Hu Jintao 胡锦涛, “坚定不移走中国特色社会主义文化发展道路 努力建设社会主义文化强国” (Unswervingly walk the path of developing the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics; Strive to build a country strong with socialist culture), *Qiushi*, January 1, 2012, http://www.qstheory.cn/zywz/201201/t20120101_133218.htm.

⁴ Richard McGregor, “Life and Soul for the Party,” *Financial Times*, October 6, 2007, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/50d71858-73a7-11dc-abf0-0000779fd2ac.html?ft_site=falcon&desktop=true#axzz4o9dTafCb.

⁵ Benjamin Kang Lim and Frank Jack Daniel, “Does China's next leader have a soft spot for Tibet?” Reuters, September 1, 2012, <http://in.reuters.com/article/china-tibet-xi-jinping-idINDEE88002I20120901>.

⁶ Kevin Carrico, “China’s Cult of Stability Is Killing Tibetans,” *Foreign Policy*, June 13, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/13/self-immolation-and-chinas-state-cult-of-stability-tibet-monks-dalai-lama/>.

⁷ “Leadership Changes: Profile: Jia Qinglin,” BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/asia_pac/02/china_party_congress/leadership_changes/html/jia_qinglin.stm; “Who’s in charge now?” *Economist*, November 21, 2002, <http://www.economist.com/node/1455207>; Joseph Kahn, “Politburo in China Gets Four New Members,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/22/world/asia/22china.html>; and “China’s New Leaders,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2012, <http://graphics.latimes.com/towergraphic-chinas-new-leaders/>.

⁸ Kerry Brown, “The Curious Case of Ideas in Modern Chinese Politics,” *Diplomat*, July 7, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/the-curious-case-of-ideas-in-modern-chinese-politics/>.

⁹ “《中共中央关于繁荣发展社会主义文艺的意见》全文公布” (Full text of “CCP Central Committee opinion on enriching and developing Socialist art and literature” published), Xinhua, October 19, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-10/19/c_1116870179.htm.

¹⁰ Paul Mozur, “China’s Internet Censors Play a Tougher Game of Cat and Mouse,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/03/business/china-internet-censorship.html>.

¹¹ Careful readers will notice that ethnic minority issues, particularly those in Tibet and Xinjiang, are not addressed in this article. This is because the CCP largely views these issues as separate from—and requiring much harsher responses than—those related to the majority Han population. Giving this topic its due requires more than a brief bullet and paragraph in this context.

¹² Richard Wike and Bruce Stokes, “Chinese Public Sees More Powerful Role in World, Names U.S. as Top Threat,” Pew Research Center, October 5, 2016, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/10/Pew-Research-Center-China-Report-FINAL-October-5-2016.pdf>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kris Best, “Diaosi: China’s ‘Loser’ Phenomenon,” *On Politics*, Vol. 7, No 1: Spring 2014, <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/onpolitics/article/view/13237/5971>.

¹⁵ To reiterate, this author does not mean to suggest that such a “model” can predict with perfect accuracy what the CCP might do, nor to suggest that additional reliable information about any one leader’s policy preferences or power would not alter such a prediction. Instead, this framing of the CCP’s values and motivations is meant to function as a tool to use in the absence of other reliable information. It also contains the implicit assumption that policy-making in China is not solely based on factions but does also wrestle with policy ideas.

¹⁶ “Reformpedia: Environment,” MacroPolo, accessed August 7, 2017, <https://macropolo.org/timeline-category/environment/>; and “中国食品辟谣网” (China Food Product Rumor-Refuting Website), accessed August 7, 2017, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/food/sppy/index.htm>.

¹⁷ Xi Jinping 习近平, “加快建设社会主义法治国家” (Speed up the construction of a Socialist Rule of Law Country), *Qiushi*, January 1, 2015, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2015-01/01/c_1113810966.htm.

¹⁸ Javier C. Hernandez, “Ailing Dissident’s Case Fits a Pattern in Chinese Prisons, Critics Say,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2017,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/world/asia/liu-xiaobo-medical-care-dissidents.html>; Jeremy Goldkorn, David Bandurski, Joshua Rosenzweig, and Alvin Y.H. Cheung, “Beijing’s Televised Confessions,” *ChinaFile*, January 20, 2016, <http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/beijings-televised-confessions>; and Eva Pils, “A new torture in China,” *China Policy Institute: Analysis*, August 10, 2017, <https://cpianalysis.org/2017/08/10/a-new-torture-in-china/>.

¹⁹ Nectar Gan, “Why foreign NGOs are struggling with new Chinese law,” *South China Morning Post*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2097923/why-foreign-ngos-are-struggling-new-chinese-law>; Echo Huang and Visen Lu, “Visiting China? Don’t expect to find a swanky hotel that will give you free-range internet,” *Quartz*, July 24, 2017, <https://qz.com/1035554/visiting-china-dont-count-on-a-swanky-hotel-to-help-you-escape-the-great-firewall/>; and “China’s new cyber-security law is worryingly vague,” *Economist*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/business/21722873-its-rules-are-broad-ambiguous-and-bothersome-international-firms-chinas-new-cyber-security>.

²⁰ Jessica Batke, “Good citizens, splendid civilization: Culture in the 13th FYP,” *MERICs Blog*, March 29, 2016, <https://blog.merics.org/en/blog-post/2016/03/29/good-citizens-splendid-civilization-culture-in-the-13th-fyp-part-3-of-merics-series/>; Evan Osnos, “Confucius Comes Home,” *New Yorker*, January 13, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/13/confucius-comes-home>; and “培育和践行社会主义核心价值观” (Training and living out core socialist values), *Xinhua core socialist values website*, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/hxjzg/>.

²¹ “领导人是怎样炼成的 (视频)” (How Chinese leaders are forged [video]), *Global Times*, October 16, 2013, <http://china.huanqiu.com/roll/2013-10/4455038.html>.

²² Adam Minter, “China’s Top Tweeters Under Fire,” *Bloomberg*, August 27, 2013, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2013-08-27/china-s-top-tweeters-under-fire>.

²³ “Full text of Hu Jintao’s report at 18th Party Congress,” *People’s Daily Online*, November 19, 2012, <http://en.people.cn/90785/8024777.html>.

²⁴ Yuan Yang, Xinning Liu, and Tom Hancock, “Shanghai loosens housing policy after rare protests,” *Financial Times*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/e576b706-4fee-11e7-bfb8-997009366969>.

²⁵ Richard Wike and Bruce Stokes, “Chinese Public Sees More Powerful Role in World, Names U.S. as Top Threat.”