

## Party Politburo Processes under Hu Jintao

H. Lyman Miller

Attention in People's Republic of China (PRC) media to the activities of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo in the 18 months since the 16th Party Congress has illuminated aspects of that body's operating procedures and its members' roles. In particular, recent media reporting has further clarified the Politburo's meeting schedule and agenda, as well as the division of responsibilities for policy supervision among its membership. There have also been rare glimpses of the "leadership small groups"—the informal task forces that coordinate implementation of Politburo decisions throughout the party, state, and other hierarchies in China's political order.

The party Politburo and its core subset, the Politburo Standing Committee, are the key decision-making bodies in Chinese politics. Traditionally, with the exception of the 1987–89 period, even basic elements of their schedule and procedures were never publicized on a current basis. Since the 16th Party Congress in November 2002, however, PRC media have begun reporting brief accounts of Politburo meetings, opening a new window on its routines. A previous article in *China Leadership Monitor* (issue 9, winter 2004) assessed aspects of the Politburo's schedule in the context of broader party procedural reforms inaugurated under Hu Jintao's leadership. This article complements and extends that analysis.

### Politburo Schedule and Agenda

In the 18 months since the 16th Party Congress, the official Xinhua News Agency has reported a total of 17 Politburo meetings (through June 1, 2004). An updated list is included as table 1. This number confirms the frequency of Politburo meetings—about once a month—inferred from the listing of the first year's meetings. The updated list also attests that no single day of the month or week is routinely set aside for Politburo meetings, although 9 of the 17 have fallen on Mondays. The reports routinely mention Hu Jintao as the presiding official.

A survey of the entire 18-month period reveals that the reported discussions and decisions of the 17 Politburo sessions fall into a small number of categories. Five discussed primarily economic issues, among which two were devoted to agriculture. Two more discussed the priority of containing the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in spring 2003 while sustaining economic growth. Two decided the timing and agenda of Central Committee plenums and National People's Congress (NPC) sessions, one discussed Politburo organization, and two more reviewed the work of the

**Table 1**  
*Publicized Meetings of the 16th Party Politburo*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Business</i>
November 16, 2002 (Saturday)	Launched campaign to study Jiang Zemin's Central Committee work report to 16th Party Congress; deliberated division of Politburo labor
December 2, 2002 (Monday)	Discussed economic situation in preparation for annual national conference on 2003 economic work; adopted work rules for 16th Politburo
December 26, 2002 (Thursday)	Discussed agriculture and rural issues in preparation for annual national conference on 2003 rural work
January 28, 2003 (Tuesday)	Discussed CDIC report on 2003 work in combating corruption
February 21, 2003 (Friday)	Set date for 16th Central Committee's Second Plenum; discussed "Opinion on Deepening Administrative and Institutional Reform"; discussed slate of state leaders to be adopted and State Council work report to be approved at Second Plenum and presented to 10th NPC
March 28, 2003 (Friday)	Discussed and approved for implementation a document on news reporting of leadership meetings and activities and regulations on foreign travel by Politburo members
April 28, 2003 (Monday)	Launched new campaign to study "three represents"; discussed balancing priority of economic work and defeating SARS
May 23, 2003 (Friday)	Discussed arrangements for improving personnel work and employing people of talent; approved compilation of "program" for studying three represents; discussed "other matters"
July 21, 2003 (Monday)	Summed up progress and stressed continuing priority and tasks in economic work and suppressing SARS; discussed "other matters"
August 11, 2003 (Monday)	Scheduled Central Committee's Third Plenum for October; set plenum agenda of hearing Politburo work report, considering decision on economic reform, and proposing revisions to PRC constitution; "looked into other matters"

*(continued)*

**Table 1** (*continued*)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Business</i>
September 29, 2003 (Monday)	Scheduled Central Committee's Third Plenum for October 11–14; discussed Politburo's work since 16th Party Congress in preparation for report to plenum; discussed draft decision on economic reform and draft proposal on PRC constitutional revision; "studied other issues"
November 24, 2003 (Monday)	Assessed economic situation and 2003 economic work; discussed cultivating talent; set central conference on 2003 economic work and national conference on cultivating talent; discussed "other topics"
December 23, 2003 (Tuesday)	Reviewed CDIC report on corruption and two trial regulations on party discipline; set date for CDIC Third Plenum; discussed "other issues"
February 23, 2004 (Monday)	Discussed draft State Council work report for upcoming NPC session and revision of CPPCC charter; "looked into other matters"
March 29, 2004 (Monday)	Discussed "three rural issues" and grain price system; considered cadre-management issues; "looked into other issues"
April 26, 2004 (Monday)	Discussed economic situation and macrocontrol issues
May 28, 2004 (Friday)	Discussed improving village democracy; "looked into other matters"

NOTES: CDIC = Central Discipline Inspection Commission, NPC = National People's Congress, SARS = severe acute respiratory syndrome, PRC = People's Republic of China, CPPCC = Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference

party's disciplinary body, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC). With respect to political reform, one session revised Politburo procedures, three discussed issues in party cadre-management and administration processes, and the most recent discussed the village democratic election system.

Most Xinhua accounts of the Politburo meetings conclude by mentioning that, in addition to the topics described, the Politburo addressed "other matters." The conspicuous absence of several crucial topics in the Xinhua reports suggests what these

“other matters” almost certainly are; it also suggests that these are policy issues of sufficient sensitivity to prohibit publicity about how the Politburo disposed of them. In particular:

- There is no hint in any of the Xinhua reports of Politburo discussion of any topic related to foreign policy or foreign economic relations.
- In addition, there is no indication of discussions of trends and events in Taiwan, despite their increasing significance over the period.
- No report has mentioned the Politburo discussing any aspect of military affairs, either within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) or internationally, including the war in Iraq.
- There is no reference to the Politburo assessing trends in domestic social stability or issues of internal security.

Finally, apart from mentioning that the Politburo approved the slate of candidates for appointment at the 10th NPC in 2003, none of the reports has noted the Politburo approving leadership changes anywhere in China’s political order—including the recent additions to the membership of the party Central Military Commission (CMC). This silence belies the fact that occasional PRC media reports on changes of provincial party secretaries and governors, for example, usually cite the Central Committee—that is, the Politburo—as having authorized them. In practice, the Politburo has the authority to decide appointments to several thousand posts in China’s political system, as well as the authority to review several thousand more appointments made at lower levels.

In contrast to the attention to meetings of the full Politburo, Xinhua reports on meetings of the Politburo Standing Committee continue to be rare. A total of three have been reported on a current basis, and three more have been mentioned only in passing.

### *Precedent and Presumptions*

Xinhua’s current reporting on meetings of the full Politburo replicates the news agency’s practice in most respects from the only previous period when it reported them—during the 1987–89 tenure of Zhao Ziyang as general secretary. Following the November 1987 13th Party Congress, Xinhua reported a total of 13 meetings under Zhao’s leadership through November 1988. Xinhua’s reporting of meetings stopped thereafter, but resumed briefly in summer 1989. Following Zhao’s removal during the Tiananmen crisis and Jiang Zemin’s appointment as general secretary, Xinhua reported two meetings, one in July and the other in August, before stopping altogether.

Xinhua’s accounts of the 1987–88 meetings under Zhao Ziyang numbered them consecutively. In contrast, the current Xinhua reports on the Politburo under Hu Jintao do not number the meetings, leaving open—though only slightly—the possibility that there have been meetings that Xinhua has not reported. In addition, the Xinhua accounts from the Zhao period also indicated the number of members who attended the meetings. From those tallies, it is clear that Politburo members based outside Beijing normally went

to the capital to attend the meetings. The reports on meetings of the Hu Politburo do not indicate attendance. Whatever details they may lack compared to reports from the earlier period, the Xinhua accounts of meetings of the Hu Politburo since the 16th Party Congress have consistently been published prominently: above the fold on the front page of the party newspaper *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*).

On a methodological note, it has long been speculated among Western analysts of Chinese leadership politics that the publication of a *People's Daily* editorial not explicitly pegged to a particular event or occasion indicates recent convocation of a Politburo meeting devoted to the topic of that editorial. If we compare a list of *People's Daily* editorials published since the 16th Party Congress to the list of Politburo meetings publicized by Xinhua, this speculation appears to be ill founded. With a single debatable exception, none of the other 16 publicized Politburo meetings was followed soon afterward by a *People's Daily* editorial on topics addressed by the Politburo. The sole exception is *People's Daily's* April 29, 2004, editorial on macroregulation of the economy, which followed a Politburo meeting that had addressed that topic three days earlier. That editorial's explicit subject was the State Council's formal punishment of the Jiangsu Tieben Iron and Steel Company for violation of state regulations, which appears to have provoked a broader leadership discussion about regulating an overheating economy. (For more on this episode, see the article by Barry Naughton in this issue.)

## Politburo Accountability

With some fanfare, the 16th Central Committee's Third Plenum in October 2003 heard a report by Hu Jintao on the ongoing work of the Politburo. Commentary on the report advertised Hu's presentation to the plenum as intended to underscore the Politburo's accountability to the body that formally appointed it—the Central Committee. Commentary further characterized the presentation as part of the Hu leadership's effort to instill and institutionalize comparable accountability in other levels of the party and government.

Hu's report to the October 2003 plenum is especially significant because it reintroduced an aspect of party political reform authorized at the 13th Party Congress in 1987 and implemented during Zhao Ziyang's brief tenure as party general secretary, a period that saw the most concerted—though ultimately aborted—effort at political reform in the Deng Xiaoping era. As part of the plan to enhance “inner-party democracy” and to make party decision making “more democratic and scientific,” the political report to the 13th Party Congress, delivered by Zhao, called for “establishing a system of regular work reports to the Politburo by its Standing Committee and to [Central Committee] plenums by the Politburo.” In addition, that congress report called for “formulating work rules and a system for holding democratic meetings of the Politburo, its Standing Committee, and the Secretariat of the Central Committee, so as to institutionalize collective leadership and place party leaders under stricter supervision and control.” Admittedly, none of the Xinhua accounts of Politburo meetings in the 1987–88 period mentioned the Politburo Standing Committee's reporting on its work to those sessions. However,

publicity on the 13th Central Committee's Second Plenum in March 1988 and its Third Plenum in September 1988 did in fact describe Zhao formally reporting on the work of the full Politburo to those sessions.

In addition to emphasizing leadership accountability, the Hu leadership has also stressed enhanced transparency in party decision making. Nevertheless, in the eight months since, no part of Hu's report to the October 2003 Third Plenum has been made public. In contrast, PRC media did publish lengthy excerpts of Zhao's report to the 13th Central Committee's Second Plenum and the purported text of his report to its Third Plenum in 1988.

## Politburo Study Sessions

Xinhua continues to report Politburo study sessions. A total of 13 have been reported since the 2002 party congress; they have usually convened on the same day as or the day after a monthly Politburo meeting. An updated list of Politburo study sessions is included as table 2. In each case, Xinhua reports the topic studied by the meeting, lists the academic specialists who briefed the Politburo on the topic, and summarizes remarks made at the session by party General Secretary Hu Jintao that explicate the significance of the topic.

As wide-ranging as the agenda of study topics has been, the sessions have a general theme and are intended as a permanent practice in the Hu Politburo. A report by the communist-controlled Hong Kong newspaper *Ta kung pao* on March 4, 2004, described the Politburo study sessions as an effort by Hu Jintao to aid the full Politburo in judging the decisions it will have to make in establishing a new "second-generation development strategy." This new strategy, *Ta kung pao* said, succeeds the first generation approach of "accelerating development and uneven development allowing some people to get rich first," an approach set down by Deng Xiaoping. The new strategy emphasizes "coordination, comprehensiveness, and sustainability" in economic development and a new "people-oriented" approach to governance that places developments in China in the context of ongoing global trends. "The arrangements for the study activities," the report stated, "reflect an in-depth understanding of the relationship between history and reality and show that, standing on the high plane of globalization, the new central government has observed and studies the development issues of the country and the nation by integrating them into the world's developmental system." The report concluded by recalling Hu Jintao's statement at the first study session, on December 26, 2002, that the sessions would become a permanent part of the Politburo agenda.

**Table 2**  
*Publicized Study Sessions of the 16th Party Politburo*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Briefing experts</i>
December 26, 2002 (Thursday)	Studied PRC constitution; heard Hu Jintao speech on authority of constitution and running country according to law	People's University Professor Xu Chongde, Wuhan University Professor Zhou Yezhong
January 28, 2003 (Tuesday)	Studied trends in world economy; heard Hu Jintao speech on importance of topic for China's economy	CASS Institute of World Economy and Politics Director Yu Yongding, CASS research fellow Jiang Xiaojuan
March 29, 2003 (Saturday)	Studied promoting employment; heard Hu Jintao speech on importance for social stability	People's University Professor Zeng Xiangquan, CASS Institute of Population and Labor Economics Director Cai Fang
April 28, 2003 (Monday)	Studied trends in contemporary science and technology in world and China; heard Hu Jintao speech on defeating SARS through science and technology and by mobilizing country	CAS Institute of Physics Director Wang Enge, Qinghua University Professor Xue Lan, Center for Disease Prevention and Control researcher Zeng Guang
May 23, 2003 (Friday)	Studied trends in military development in major countries; heard Hu Jintao speech on China's military modernization priorities	China Institute of Military Science researchers Qian Haihao, Fu Liquan
July 21, 2003 (Monday)	Studied development of party ideology; heard Hu Jintao speech on importance of current study of "three represents"	Central Committee's Party History Research Center researchers Zhang Qihua, Zhang Shujun
August 12, 2003 (Tuesday)	Studied trends in world culture and in China; heard Hu Jintao speech on building "socialist culture with Chinese characteristics"	CASS Institute of Journalism researcher Zhang Ximing, Qinghua University School of Media and Broadcasting Professor Xiong Chengyu

*(continued)*

**Table 2** (*continued*)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Briefing experts</i>
September 29, 2003 (Monday)	Studied building socialist political civilization and governing according to law; heard Hu Jintao speech on political reform	Fudan University International Relations Professor Lin Shangli, CASS Institute of Law researcher Li Lin
November 24, 2003 (Monday)	Studied history of development in major countries since 15th century; heard Hu Jintao speech on importance of historical knowledge in guiding China's current development	Beijing Normal University Professor Qi Shirong, Nanjing University Professor Qin Chengdan
February 23, 2004 (Monday)	Studied world trends and China's security environment; heard Hu Jintao speech on taking broad view	Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Foreign Affairs College Professor Qin Yaqing, CASS researcher Zhang Yuyan
March 29, 2004 (Monday)	Studied trends in agriculture in world and China; heard Hu Jintao remarks	Agriculture University Professor Cheng Xu, Ministry of Agriculture's Rural Research Center Professor Ke Bingsheng
April 26, 2004 (Monday)	Studied building legal system and expanding popular political participation through elections; heard Hu Jintao remarks	Beijing University Professor Wu Zhipan, People's University Professor Wang Liming
May 28, 2004 (Friday)	Studied developments in Chinese philosophy and social sciences; heard Hu Jintao remarks	Shanghai Finance and Economy University Professor Cheng Enfu, CASS Professor Li Chongfu

NOTES: PRC = People's Republic of China, SARS = severe acute respiratory syndrome, CASS = Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, CAS = Chinese Academy of Sciences



## Leadership Division of Labor

All members of the Politburo and its Standing Committee undertake concurrent responsibilities during their tenures on these bodies. For some, these responsibilities are reflected in their concurrent appointments to formal leadership positions in other institutions in China's political order. On the Hu Politburo, 17 of the 25 members fall into this category. These 17 include the four top-ranked members of the Politburo Standing Committee—respectively, the PRC president, the chairman of the NPC, the premier of the State Council, and the chairman of the united front umbrella body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—and the seventh-ranked member, who is chairman of the party disciplinary body. In addition, the full Politburo (including the single alternate member) includes two representatives from the military, the heads of three key Central Committee bodies—the Organization and Propaganda Departments and the General Office—the head of the national trade union body, and the party bosses from six provinces: four coastal, one central, and one western.<sup>1</sup>

The remaining eight Politburo members have taken on responsibility for monitoring portfolios in specific policy sectors. These responsibilities are never formally announced, but it is possible to infer them from media reporting on their public appearances. In these roles, Politburo leaders ordinarily attend and often address work conferences of officials in the policy areas that they monitor on behalf of the Politburo; likewise, during inspection tours of areas outside the capital, their remarks frequently focus on those areas for which they have specific responsibility. These portfolio responsibilities are assigned at the Politburo's first meeting as a body following a party congress. Xinhua's November 16, 2002, account of the first session of the Hu Politburo thus mentioned that the meeting had "studied relevant questions on the division of work of the Politburo." In addition, the secretaries of the party Secretariat supervise implementation of Politburo decisions in specific policy sectors, as do the vice premiers and state councillors of the State Council. A majority of these officials are also concurrently Politburo members.

After 18 months of public appearances by the leadership, it is possible to identify the portfolio responsibilities of most of these leaders. The portfolio assignments of the four members of the Politburo Standing Committee whose responsibilities are not otherwise clear—i.e., they do not hold other formal leadership positions—appear to be those listed in table 3. In addition, four members of the larger Politburo have specific policy responsibilities in lieu of formal leadership positions, as shown in table 4.

Among the seven members of the party Secretariat (apart from Hu Jintao), policy responsibilities appear to be those listed in table 5. On the State Council, all four vice premiers (Huang Ju, Wu Yi, Zeng Peiyan, and Hui Liangyu) and two of the five state councillors (Zhou Yongkang and Cao Gangchuan) serve concurrently on the Politburo and perform roles corresponding to their respective portfolio responsibilities there. The responsibilities of the remaining three state councillors are given in table 6.

**Table 3**  
*Policy Responsibilities of Politburo Standing Committee Members*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Portfolio</i>
Zeng Qinghong	Party apparatus; Hong Kong and Macao affairs
Huang Ju	International and domestic banking and finance; state-owned enterprise reform and unemployment; management of economy (assists premier)
Li Changchun	Ideology and propaganda
Luo Gan	Legal affairs and internal security

**Table 4**  
*Policy Responsibilities of Regular Politburo Members*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Portfolio</i>
Hui Liangyu	Agriculture and rural affairs
Wu Yi	Foreign economic relations; public health
Zhou Yongkang	Internal security
Zeng Peiyan	Macromanagement of economy; environmental policy; development of western region and revitalization of northeast

**Table 5**  
*Policy Responsibilities of Secretariat Members*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Portfolio</i>
Zeng Qinghong	Party apparatus; day-to-day operations of Secretariat (on behalf of Hu Jintao)
Liu Yunshan	Propaganda apparatus (includes all media, educational institutions, social science research institutions, and cultural organizations)
Zhou Yongkang	Internal security
He Guoqiang	Personnel affairs
Wang Gang	Intraparty communication and logistics
Xu Caihou	Party affairs in People's Liberation Army
He Yong	Party and government administration; corruption cases

**Table 6**  
*Policy Responsibilities of State Council Members*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Portfolio</i>
Tang Jiaxuan	Foreign relations; Taiwan affairs
Hua Jianmin	Government administrative affairs
Chen Zhili	Education; science and technology; cultural affairs

## Leadership Groups

Coordination of policy in specific sectors is managed by informal bodies known as “leadership groups” or “leadership small groups” (*lingdao xiaozu*). There appear to be at least two types—“central leading groups,” which manage policy on behalf of the Politburo and Secretariat, and “State Council small groups,” which coordinate policy implementation in the government.

The central leading groups in the party were first organized in 1958 as informal task forces. Their existence and composition are only rarely mentioned in PRC media, and their procedures have never been publicized. Their number is uncertain, and as informal bodies several of them have probably undergone reorganization, renaming, and outright dissolution over time. Nevertheless, there are at least four key groups that have operated across the entire period: the central leading groups for foreign affairs, Taiwan affairs, finance and economy, and ideology and propaganda.

With the exception of the Central Taiwan Affairs Leading Group, PRC media have reported very little of the membership of these key coordinating bodies. Various lists for their composition have been publicized in independent Hong Kong media and in foreign media, but none of them has been confirmed by PRC media. Traditionally, the premier headed the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group until 1998, when then-party general secretary Jiang Zemin assumed the role instead of the new premier, Zhu Rongji, who focused on managing the economy and China’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). Hu Jintao presumably assumed leadership over the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group after the November 2002 16th Party Congress, but no mention of him in this role can be found in PRC media. Similarly, Wen Jiabao presumably chairs the Central Finance and Economy Leading Group, and Li Changchun probably presides over the Central Ideology and Propaganda Leading Group, but PRC media do not appear to have mentioned them in these positions. This analyst has located only one identification of a member of these three groups in PRC media since the 16th Party Congress—Chen Xiwen, who has been referred to more than once as deputy director of the Central Finance and Economy Leading Group’s General Office.

The sole exception to this broad silence is a list of the members of the Central Taiwan Affairs Leading Group that appeared in the communist-controlled Hong Kong

newspaper *Wei wei po* in December 2003. According to that account, Hu Jintao chairs the group, and Politburo Standing Committee member and CPPCC Chairman Jia Qinglin is Hu's deputy. The members of the group include: State Councillor Tang Jiaxuan, Politburo member and party General Office Director Wang Gang, party United Front Work Department Director Liu Yandong, Association for Relations across the Taiwan Strait President Wang Daohan, party and State Council Taiwan Affairs Office Director Chen Yunlin, Minister of State Security Xu Yongyue, and PLA deputy chief of staff and military intelligence chief Xiong Guangkai. *Wen wei po* provided no explanation for why Beijing took the unusual step of publicizing this list, which the newspaper appended to a report on a forthcoming meeting between Hu Jintao and a group of Taiwanese businesspeople.<sup>2</sup>

In a departure from their reticence about the party leading groups, PRC media refer to the State Council leading groups frequently. Premier Wen Jiabao, for example, has been mentioned several times as head of the State Council Leading Group on Revitalizing the Northeast Region and Old Industrial Bases and the State Council Leading Group on Development of the Western Region, and Zeng Peiyan has been identified as a member of both groups. Vice Premier Wu Yi has been referred to as head of the State Council Leading Group on Rectifying and Regulating the Market Economy.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the common division in foreign media between "coastal" and "interior" provinces, Chinese practice follows a three-category division among "coastal," "central," and "western" provinces.

<sup>2</sup> *Wen wei po*, December 26, 2003, FBIS CPP-2003-1225-000017.