

## The Road to the 17th Party Congress

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This summer the Chinese leadership will begin active preparations for the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), expected to convene in 2007. Party congresses are the most important public event in Chinese leadership politics, and their convocation involves long preparations that inevitably heat up the political atmosphere in Beijing more than a year ahead of time. This article projects the course of preparations ahead and suggests some of the issues that are likely to be debated on the way to the 17th Congress.

According to the CCP's constitution, party congresses convene every five years. One of the hallmarks of the political reforms pressed by Deng Xiaoping since the beginning of the reform era in 1978 has been the restoration of institutionalized political processes after two decades of erratic observance under the leadership of Mao Zedong. In keeping with Deng's emphasis, this constitutional stipulation has been rigorously observed since the party's 11th Congress in 1982.<sup>1</sup> This regularity in the convocation of party congresses makes it possible to project the likely course of preparations for convening the 17th Congress in 2007.

Party congresses are important for two reasons. First, they establish the party's line in all major policy sectors. In principle, the party congress is the most authoritative body in the CCP's organizational hierarchy, and so its policy prescriptions reflect the CCP's authoritative line on all issues that the congress addresses. A party congress brings together roughly 2,000 delegates from all levels of the CCP and normally lasts about a week. Over the course of its session, a party congress sets down a consensus evaluation of the party's work over the five-year period since the preceding congress and of the party's present situation, and it sets forth general guidelines for the party's priorities, emphases, and tasks for the coming five-year period until the next congress. These supremely authoritative judgments about past work and future tasks are incorporated into a long "political report," normally delivered by the party's top leader, the general secretary

Once endorsed by party congress resolution, the political report establishes at the highest authority the party's consensus line on virtually all policy sectors that the party leadership will be addressing in the five years until the next party congress convenes. The party leadership is expected to refer to the congress guidelines as the basis for all subsequent major policy decisions. Once the party congress has closed, its guidelines may be changed by the roughly 200-member body that acts in the name of the congress, the party Central Committee, which, by constitutional stipulation, meets at least once a year. The initiative both for drafting the congress's political report and for convening plenary sessions (or "plenums") of the Central Committee lies with the party's top

leadership—the general secretary and the Politburo. The substance of the political report and of plenum decisions therefore reflects the prevailing consensus of the top leadership itself, which uses the congress and Central Committee to give its decisions the authoritative endorsement of the party as a whole.

The other reason party congresses are important is that they change the party leadership itself. A congress's main task in this respect is to elect a new Central Committee, which will preside over the party until the next party congress. The day after the party congress closes, the new Central Committee convenes its first plenum, the sole function of which is to appoint a new party leadership. These appointments include a new Politburo and its Standing Committee (the top decision-making bodies), a new Central Military Commission (the top decision-making body in military affairs), a new Secretariat (the body that oversees implementation of Politburo decisions throughout China's political hierarchy), and a new general secretary. The degree of leadership turnover in these appointments varies from congress to congress.

A congress's twin tasks of setting down broad guidelines for the party's upcoming work and of changing the party's top leadership are fundamentally intertwined. Judgments about the success or shortcomings of party work over the period since the previous party congress affect the standing and prospects of party leaders in power over that time. In an era in which administrative and substantive expertise in specific policy areas is increasingly important for promotion into the top levels of the party—alongside traditional criteria of political patronage and factional balance of power—policy departures conveyed in the congress political report shape the career prospects of individual leaders. At the same time, policy directions imparted in a congress's political report reflect in some measure the strength of leaders and their allies who advocate that course over other leaders advocating a different policy course.

For all these reasons, preparations for convocation of a party congress are intensely political and heat up the political atmosphere in Beijing more than a year ahead of time. Over this period, appointments to high-level posts in the Central Committee departments, in the State Council ministries, in the PLA's four general departments and China's seven military regions, and in the provinces are made with an eye toward concurrent appointment to the Central Committee. Some appointments—to the post of party chief in provinces such as Shanghai, Beijing, Shandong, Guangdong, and Tianjin, for example—may involve consideration of concurrent membership on the Politburo itself.

Meanwhile, top leaders debate policy questions with an eye toward authoritative endorsement of their views in the upcoming congress's political report. The party's primary mouthpieces—the newspaper *People's Daily* and the semimonthly journal *Seeking Truth*—publish commentary and opinion pieces that reflect competing positions on issues that the congress's political report will address. As the political atmosphere heats up, the shadows of leadership politicking under way in the party's internal networks become tantalizingly visible in the open press. At the same time, colorful and often contradictory rumors and speculations circulate among mid- and lower-ranking officials

and academics in Beijing and make their way into Hong Kong's independent China-watching press and foreign media. For all these reasons, the long campaign to convene a CCP congress is an intensively political season.

## Milestones along the Road

If procedures for convening the 17th Party Congress follow earlier precedents, a number of events will mark milestones along the way. Most, though not all of these events will be publicized in PRC media.

- This summer, the Politburo will schedule the 16th Central Committee's Sixth Plenum for sometime this fall and submit a plenum agenda that will include authorization to convene the 17th Party Congress, probably in fall of 2007. This would conform with the typical pattern followed in September 2001, when the 15th Central Committee's Sixth Plenum authorized convocation of the 16th Party Congress "in the latter half of 2002 in Beijing."
- Immediately after the Sixth Plenum, a preparatory committee for the 17th congress will be established, almost certainly presided over by party General Secretary Hu Jintao. The preparatory committee will oversee three basic tasks: election of roughly 2,000 party delegates to the congress; drafting of the political report that Hu Jintao will deliver at the congress; and nomination of a new Central Committee membership, as well as of new top leadership bodies. PRC media have not publicized formations of past preparatory committees or their work in preparations for past party congresses.
- Sometime in the late summer of 2007, the Politburo will propose a precise date for the party congress to open; approve the lists of delegates, the draft political report, and the slates of leadership nominees; and schedule the Central Committee's Seventh Plenum. In the run-up to the plenum, judging by past practice, Hu Jintao and other top party leaders will preview the drafted political report in a series of meetings with party and non-party representatives in Beijing.
- Finally, the plenum, which will likely meet a few days ahead of the party congress, will formally approve the congress documents submitted by the Politburo and authorize the party congress to open.

Each of the three tasks undertaken by the preparatory committee will take several months. Election of congress delegates takes place among institutional electoral blocs "by secret ballot and through competitive elections." (Xinhua, 7 November 2002). In preparation for the 15th Party Congress, in 1997, delegate elections were conducted in 36 blocs—one for each of China's 32 province-level units, one for the Hong Kong special administrative region and Macau, and one each for central party organs, national state institutions and the PLA. In 2001–2, two new blocs were added—one for centrally directed state-owned-enterprise party units and another for central finance and banking party units—for a total of 38 blocs sending delegations to the 16th Party Congress. Over the course of the party congress to which they are elected, these delegations convene

regular sessions for discussion of congress business among themselves and in the company of top party leaders, frequently publicized by Xinhua, the official news agency.

In preparations for the 2002 16th Congress, delegate elections began after a Central Committee circular authorized the process in October 2001; they concluded in June 2002. Over that period, Xinhua reported piecemeal completion of delegate selection in most of these blocs. The total number of delegates attending the 1997 15th Party Congress was 2,048, representing 58 million members of the CCP; 2,114 delegates attended the 16th National Congress of the CCP in November 2002, representing 66 million party members. The CCP's membership recently topped 70 million, and so the number of delegates to the 17th Party Congress may be slightly higher.

## Hu without Huism

If past practices hold, the drafting of the political report that Hu will present to the 17th Party Congress—his first—will follow an elaborate process of review and revision. According to Xinhua, the political report that General Secretary Jiang Zemin presented to the 16th Congress in 2002 went through four drafts on its way to the congress. Over that drafting process, which Xinhua states took nearly 13 months, the Politburo Standing Committee reviewed four successive drafts and the full Politburo two. A draft was circulated as an internal party document “to solicit opinions” from more than 3,100 people among 178 party units throughout China. It was further reviewed by party and state officials in the capital and by representatives of non-party constituencies over a 19-day period in August and September 2002, introducing some 600 changes in the text. Finally, the Central Committee's Seventh Plenum, convened five days before the party congress opened, introduced further amendments.

The production of the 16th Party Congress political report included the following steps:

- Jiang Zemin began thinking about the “theme, framework, and ideas” to be incorporated into the political report during numerous inspection tours throughout China from August 2001 to May 2002. In August 2001, 14 teams were formed to research topics that the report would address.
- Soon after the September 2002 Sixth Plenum, a drafting group was formed. The entire drafting process proceeded under Jiang Zemin's supervision, but Hu Jintao chaired the meetings of the drafting group over the subsequent year.
- The drafting group itself formed eight research teams that toured China, convening 80 forums to gather views on issues the report should treat. On the basis of these efforts, the drafting team in December 2001 produced a report that it submitted to the Politburo Standing Committee for review. On the basis of this review, Jiang met personally with the drafting group on 14 January 2002 to establish the main theme of the political report.

- After 40 days of work and further instructions from Jiang, the drafting group submitted an outline for the political report on 26 February 2002 to the Politburo Standing Committee, which reviewed and approved it.
- Over the next two months, the drafting group produced a first draft, which the Politburo Standing Committee reviewed over a two-day session on 16–17 May 2002. On the basis of these discussions, Jiang—“on behalf of the Politburo Standing Committee”—previewed major elements of the draft in a long speech on 31 May 2002 to the graduating class of the Central Party School. Xinhua and PRC media devoted heavy coverage to the speech, which, Xinhua stated, “won the unanimous approval” of people across China.
- Thereafter, the draft was circulated through internal channels to party units throughout the country. From 30 August to 17 September 2002, Jiang chaired an eight-day forum in the leadership compound of Zhongnanhai in the capital to solicit the reactions of party and government officials and of representatives of non-party constituencies in the capital. On the basis of all of these discussions and further instructions from Jiang, the drafting group produced a new draft.
- Reviews first by the Politburo and then by the Central Committee’s Seventh Plenum on the eve of the congress produced the final draft of the political report presented by Jiang.

A comparable process of drafting, review, and revision was followed in the production of the political reports to the 1992 14th Congress and the 1997 15th Congress.

This elaborate process of consultation, drafting, review, and revision underscores some basic conclusions about a political report presented at a party congress. First, most of the congress delegates will already be thoroughly familiar with its contents, even if some of the later revisions may be new to them. Having reviewed early drafts of the document, they may be forgiven for looking bored during its presentation at the party congress. Second, and more significantly, the process underscores that the political report is a consensus document reflecting compromise and negotiation among competing leaders and party constituencies, presumably 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. Although the general secretary has the opportunity to implant his own imprint on the political report, it is not solely a presentation of his views. In that sense, although Jiang delivered the political report to the 16th Congress, it was not a Jiang speech.

Hu Jintao will likely follow the same general procedures in supervising production of the political report that he will deliver at the 17th Party Congress next year. If Hu’s approach follows Jiang Zemin’s, then the drafting group formed after the Sixth Plenum this fall will be chaired by Politburo Standing Committee member Zeng Qinghong. In the transfer of top leadership posts from Jiang to Hu since the 2002 16th Party Congress, Zeng has been filling most of the positions that Hu occupied under Jiang’s leadership. In particular, Zeng appears to manage the party apparatus, including

chairing the party Secretariat on Hu's behalf, as Hu did under Jiang from 1992 until 2002.

The political report produced under Hu's and Zeng's direction will undoubtedly feature many of the formulations that have emerged under Hu's tenure as general secretary. Most of these have been devoted to methods of improving CCP governance, including a focus on "people-centered" policies, deploying a "scientific development concept" to guide decision making, building a "harmonious society" that alleviates the social tensions that have arisen from the advance of reform, and enhancing the transparency of governance and party decision making. These themes have sometimes been described in Hong Kong and foreign media as "leftist" and "Maoist"—inappropriately, insofar as "Maoism" and the "leftist" politics of the pre-reform decades reflected a supreme emphasis on "class struggle" and the mass tactics associated with class warfare, while the focus of these contemporary themes is on enhancing the CCP's "governing capacity" in order to allow the regime to survive.

These themes are broadly associated with Hu Jintao's leadership, although they are not advertised in PRC media as Hu's exclusive intellectual property. Apart from new themes on military issues, Hu has not been described as the author of any new theoretical or policy departures in his nearly four-year tenure as the party's top leader.

Although this comports with Hu's apparent effort to promote collective leadership decision making, it does not altogether depart from patterns observed during Jiang Zemin's tenure as party leader. The 14th and 15th Party Congresses each offered new formulations of breakthrough significance to economic reform—the 1992 congress defined China's economy as a "socialist market economy," and the 15th congress redefined the essential characteristics of "socialism." But neither of these formulations were celebrated as contributions of Jiang Zemin's pioneering theoretical genius. In early 2000, Jiang did enunciate a new theme that became strongly identified with him—the "three represents" formulation. Following Politburo endorsement of the formulation in May 2000, however, it was not ordinarily referred to as Jiang's personal contribution, but simply as the "important thinking of the three represents." All the same, the formulation was ultimately written into the preamble of the party constitution at the 16th Congress in 2002 on a par with the theoretical contributions of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

## Leadership Changes

If past practices are followed, the effort to compose lists of candidates for the new Central Committee and top leadership bodies appointed at the new Central Committee's first plenum after the congress will receive no publicity. PRC media gave no inkling of the selection processes that produced the lists of nominations for any party congress throughout the reform era, either on the way to the congress or in its wake. By contrast, PRC media have described the process of nominating leaders to government posts in the wake of successive National People's Congresses since 1993.

Nevertheless, the media have given occasional hints about the process. In the wake of the 1992 14th Party Congress, a Xinhua subsidiary service noted that, over the year preceding the congress, Hu Jintao had worked with Jiang Zemin and party Organization Department Director Lu Feng in composing the list of candidates for the new Central Committee. Hu's participation in this sensitive process foreshadowed his more general role in running the party apparatus under Jiang's supervision from 1992 to 2002. If the procedures used in 1992 and probably in 1997 and 2002 are followed in preparing for the 17th Party Congress, then Hu, together with Zeng Qinghong and Organization Department Director He Guoqiang, will likely supervise selection of the new Central Committee and leadership members subject to review by the Politburo and its Standing Committee.

Changes in the Central Committee are likely to be less sweeping than those brought about by the 16th Party Congress in 2002, which involved a full-scale turnover of leadership generations. But they may nevertheless still be considerable in extent. Neither the Central Committee departments nor the State Council ministries have seen much turnover since the 2002 party congress and the 2003 11th National People's Congress (NPC), and there appear to be several possible changes, partly due to mandatory retirement provisions for leaders above specified ages. In the provinces, a fifth generation of leaders may consolidate their hold in top party and government positions in a wave of anticipated changes in the coming year. (For a detailed analysis of these changes, see the article by Li Cheng in this issue of *CLM*.)

The scale of turnover on the party Politburo and its Standing Committee, Secretariat, and Central Military Commission (CMC) may also be smaller than the sweeping changes that accompanied the leadership transition from Jiang to Hu in 2002. That congress and the subsequent first plenum of the Central Committee it elected saw major retirements, as well as a large influx of younger "fourth generation" leaders, mostly in their late 50s and early 60s. Most of these leaders will still be well short of 70, the age at which by apparent internal party norm leaders are expected to retire at the next party congress. Changes in these top leadership groups, therefore, are likely to be more limited, preserving a core of leadership stability until the party's 18th Congress in 2012.

Nevertheless, some leaders may be expected to depart:

- One member of the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee—Luo Gan—will be at least 70 by the time the congress convenes. In addition, Huang Ju, who will be 69 in 2007, may also retire. Huang stopped appearing in public from mid-January until early June this year, prompting rumors that he had fallen ill or, more darkly, speculation that he was in political difficulty. That his office continued to issue greetings messages and engage in other ceremonial activities in his name that were reported in PRC media suggested that he was not in political trouble and enhanced the likelihood of illness as the explanation for his lack of appearances.
- On the broader Politburo, General Cao Gangchuan, who also serves as vice chairman of the CMC, will be 72 at the time of the congress.

- In addition, a few other leaders who will be in their late 60s by the time of the congress may be candidates for retirement. On the Politburo Standing Committee, Central Discipline Inspection Commission Chairman Wu Guanzheng will be 69. On the Politburo, Vice Premiers Wu Yi and Zeng Peiyan will be 69.
- Tianjin party chief Zhang Lichang will be 68 and well past the retirement provision of 65 for provincial party secretaries. Conceivably, Zhang may lose his Tianjin post and retain his Politburo post, while taking on another national post, such as ranking vice chairman of the NPC Standing Committee.

How much the resulting changes extend Hu Jintao's reach into critical bureaucracies and consolidate his power cannot be assessed at this early date, but that question will certainly be at the crux of the intricate process of leadership change going into the congress.

Finally, the congress may elevate Hu Jintao's implicitly designated successor. If Hu himself follows the norm of retirement at age 70, his second term as party general secretary following the 17th Congress will be his last. Hu benefited from a process of incremental preparation to succeed Jiang Zemin that began in 1992 and culminated in his emergence as China's top party, state, and military leader in the 2002–2004 leadership transition. If a course comparable to Hu's is followed, preparation of Hu's successor would perhaps begin with his elevation onto the Politburo Standing Committee at the 17th Congress, followed by his incremental assumption of posts second in command to Hu as vice president and, eventually, vice chairman of the CMC. Most of these posts are currently occupied by Zeng Qinghong, who will be 68 by the time of the party congress. The preparation of Hu's successor may well become entangled in the fate of Zeng Qinghong, an important leader long associated with Jiang Zemin.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the 1982 12th Party Congress was held five years after the 1977 11th Congress, it convened a year later than originally planned. The press communiqué of the 11th Central Committee's Fifth Plenum in February 1980 had announced that the 12th Congress would be convened "before the due date"—most likely in 1981—to address "a series of important issues that demand prompt and speedy solution." In the end, a number of unanticipated problems—a surge in inflation, debates over the pace and scope of economic reform, and persisting debates about "revisionism" and the party's "general task"—delayed convocation of the congress.

<sup>2</sup> The preceding details of the process of drafting the political report presented at the 2002 16th Party Congress are drawn from Xia Lin, Zhang Sutang, and Sun Chengbin, "A Marxist Programmatic Document—An Account of How the Report to the 16th National Party Congress Was Prepared," Xinhua, 19 November 2002, translated as FBIS document CPP2002112000003. Comparable accounts of the drafting of the political reports to the 1992 14th Congress and the 1997 15th Congress were also carried by Xinhua immediately after each congress closed. See, respectively, the accounts transmitted by Xinhua on 23 October 1992, in FBIS *Daily Report—China*, FBIS-CHI-207, 22–27, and on 25 September 1997, as translated by FBIS as document number FBIS-CHI-97-268.