

# CPC Futures

*The New Era of  
Socialism with  
Chinese Characteristics*

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## **Age, Factions and Specialisation in the Path to the New Leadership at the 20th Party Congress**

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In an institutionalised one-party state, power is typically concentrated in the hands of the top few officials. Therefore, scholars have paid a great deal of attention to the composition and policy preferences of senior officials in one-party regimes. In predicting the potential outcomes at the top level of the 20th Party Congress, I take three major factors into consideration in order to deduce two possible scenarios for the Politburo Standing Committee. These are age, factional affiliation and job specialisation.

In terms of age, an informal rule of retirement for Politburo and Standing Committee members who surpass the age of 67 at the time of the party congress has been in place since the 1990s, namely, the “seven up, eight down” (at 67 you can stay, at 68 you have to go) rule. With the exception of the secretary general, this rule has been applied consistently since the late Jiang Zemin years. To be sure, quite a number of officials on the borderline of 67 received promotions into the Standing Committee, including Li Zhanshu at the 19th Party Congress. As discussed below, one way in which a supremely powerful Xi Jinping can change the rule to his advantage is by changing the “seven up, eight down” rule to a “six up, seven down” one to force everyone 67 or older to retire.

The second consideration is factional affiliation. Typically measured as overlapping school or career experience between high-level patrons and mid-level clients, such affiliations have a significant impact on the promotion prospects of the clients (Jia, Kudamatsu and Seim 2014; Meyer, Shih and Lee 2016; Shih, Adolph and Liu 2012). Both on the way up and on the way down, the fate of

a senior patron can meaningfully affect the promotion prospects of his clients. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, the vast majority of newly promoted Politburo members had previous work or school ties with Xi, while no one with previous work ties with Hu Jintao joined the Politburo as a new member. One can expect factional affiliation with Xi to continue to play a major role in Standing Committee and Politburo level promotions. Given the dominance of the Xi faction in the Party, one can expect some balancing among the various tendencies within his faction. Four major experiences in Xi's career shaped his faction: Fujian, Zhejiang, Shanghai and Tsinghua University. In addition, he also acquired a few faction members through his family connections in north-western China.

Finally, although factional affiliation is an important factor, some of the positions at the Standing Committee or Politburo level are highly specialised, and require at least some prior experience in those domains. For example, although law and politics committee secretaries typically had rich local governance experience, since the 1990s, they all have had central level experience in the law and politics apparatus, especially in the Ministry of Public Security. Given the sprawling and complex bureaucracies and enormous power wielded by the law and politics and State Council bureaucracies, there are major benefits to having experienced officials leading them. Xi can simply rotate his favourites to lead these bureaucracies into the relevant positions prior to their promotion to the top positions in these bureaucracies.

Given these factors, the remaining factor driving top level promotion outcomes at the 20th Party Congress will be the degree to which Xi can dominate the appointment process. Even up to the 19th Party Congress, Xi did not completely dominate; officials not in his faction, including Han Zheng and Wang Yang, still received promotions to the Standing Committee, although he clearly wielded much more influence at the Politburo level. However, we can imagine that at the 20th Party Congress, Xi might exercise even greater power than he did at the 19th Party Congress, resulting in the near complete elimination of non-Xi officials from the Standing Committee and from the Politburo. Below, I sketch out two scenarios reflecting these two levels of dominance at the Standing Committee level.

### **A Weakly Dominant Xi Scenario**

In creating the two scenarios, I begin by eliminating all current Standing Committee and Politburo members who will be above 67 in the fall of 2022. In the weakly dominant scenario, those who have not surpassed 67 will remain

in the Standing Committee or the Politburo, though they may be rotated to different positions. We know that this will happen already since Li Keqiang, for example, announced that he will step down from the premier position in 2023. As someone who is 67 this year, he is entitled to serve another term in the Standing Committee, possibly as the National People's Congress (NPC) chairman, as Li Peng did. In the weakly dominant scenario, he will then be able to serve a full term as NPC chairman.

Table 1 outlines the possible membership of the 20th Standing Committee in a weakly dominant Xi scenario. To be sure, Xi remains the secretary-general of the CPC even in this scenario, giving him a third term in office. Similarly, Wang Yang, who also is 67, will remain in the Standing Committee with a possible move into the premier position vacated by Li. Wang is eminently qualified for the position since he has served as party secretary for major provinces, as well as a stint as State Council vice-premier.

This arrangement is not necessarily disadvantageous for Xi. Wang's age will limit his tenure as premier to one term, allowing Xi to appoint someone closer to him to be the next premier of China at the 21st Party Congress in 2027. Like Li and Wang Yang, Wang Huning initially benefited from Jiang Zemin's patronage, but has since enjoyed the support of both Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, culminating in his elevation into the Standing Committee at the 19th Party Congress.

Again, given his age at 67, Wang Huning should be able to remain in his current position as the propaganda tsar of China for five more years, perhaps with a rotation to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Chair position if that were to be vacated by Premier Wang Yang. Among incumbent Standing Committee members, Zhao Leji, currently the secretary of the Central Discipline and Inspection Commission (CDIC), is the most likely to remain in his current position, in addition of course to Xi Jinping. At 65, Zhao is well below the 67 cut-off; moreover, he is a long-standing Xi follower from his north-western roots. Since 2019, Zhao also oversaw the "two upholding" campaign to ensure absolute obedience to Xi among party and state cadres (Xinhua 2019). There is every reason to believe that Zhao will remain in the Standing Committee and continue as the secretary of the CDIC.

As for the two Standing Committee seats vacated by Li Zhanshu and Han Zheng, the two most likely newcomers are long-time Xi secretary Ding Xuexiang and former Xi personal secretary Li Qiang, who is now the party secretary of Shanghai. Clearly, these two officials are trusted by Xi as they both served as his personal secretary and saw very rapid promotions in the past ten years, culminating to their entries into the Politburo in 2017.

If Wang Yang takes the premier position, Ding will likely become the CPPCC chairman or replace Wang Huning as the propaganda tsar of China. Because Ding can serve two terms in the Standing Committee, either position would allow him to take an even more powerful post in 2027, perhaps as the new CDIC secretary or NPC chairman. Of the four major provincial secretaries in Xi's faction (Li Qiang, Li Xi, Cai Qi, Chen Min'er), Li Qiang likely has the best chance of landing a seat in the Standing Committee as Han Zheng's replacement. Besides serving as one of Xi's closest confidantes in Zhejiang, he is following in the footsteps of Han Zheng, who was also the party secretary of Shanghai. Despite some grumblings about his performance during the lockdown in Shanghai in April and May 2022, the similarity of his trajectory with Han makes Li a natural candidate for the executive vice premier position.

**Table 1:** Standing Committee Arrangement in a Weakly Dominant Xi Scenario

	Age in 2022	Xi-affiliated	Potential Position
Xi Jinping	69	Yes	Secretary General
Li Keqiang	67	No	NPC Chairman
Wang Yang	67	No	Premier/CPPCC Chairman
Wang Huning	67	No	Propaganda Tsar/ CPPCC Chair
Zhao Leji	65	Yes	CDIC Secretary
Ding Xuexiang	60	Yes	CPPCC Chair/ Propaganda
Li Qiang	63	Yes	Executive Vice Premier/ Premier

## A Strongly Dominant Xi Scenario

Xi's power has likely strengthened since the 2017 19th Party Congress. Thus, the political equilibrium which dictated promotion patterns in 2017 might not hold in 2022. A much stronger Xi Jinping would have the ability to force officials not in his faction, but at the borderline retirement age of 67 to retire. This may allow him to elevate a few more of his followers into the Standing Committee.

One should note that none of the likely entrants into the Standing Committee from Xi's faction has reached 67 in 2022, except for Cai Qi. This was perhaps by design as Xi considered whom to elevate into the Politburo in 2017, which excluded older officials in his faction such as Liu Cigui. The most convenient tool to do this might be to modify the retirement age in the Politburo from "seven up, eight down" to "six up, seven down". Li Keqiang, Wang Yang and Wang Huning would then all have to step down from the Standing Committee as they are 67 (Table 2).

As Table 2 shows, in their place, Li Xi, Chen Min'er, and Huang Kunming would be elevated. Of course, instituting a "six up, seven down" rule would compel 67-year-old Cai Qi, the current Beijing party secretary, to also step down from the Politburo instead of winning a promotion into the Standing Committee.

The new rule would also compel Wang Huning's retirement, even though Wang apparently is a trusted advisor of Xi. For Xi, this might be a worthwhile trade-off since with one stroke he can eliminate the last remaining bloc that can curtail his power. Both Wang Yang and Li Keqiang owe their careers more to Hu Jintao than to Xi himself and have networks that are independent of Xi. As long as they hold senior positions in the Party, they remain potential rallying points for an inner-party opposition to Xi. By forcing them into retirement, this potential threat would be all but eliminated. Given that Xi has a healthy supply of officials whom he can elevate to the Standing Committee, the loss of Cai Qi does not change his ability to dominate the Standing Committee much. Wang Huning, meanwhile, can continue to advise Xi on global affairs as an advisor without a senior party position.

As seen in Table 2, in this strongly dominant Xi scenario, Li Qiang, someone who has not worked in the State Council, may suddenly find himself the next premier of China, while Li Xi, the party secretary of Guangdong, would take the executive vice premier position. Following Li Zhanshu's footsteps, Ding Xuexiang can take the NPC chairman position, while Huang Kunming, the current head of the Central Propaganda Department, can replace Wang Huning as the propaganda Tsar of China. Chen Min'er, meanwhile, can replace Wang Yang as the head of the CPPCC. In this scenario, Xi's faction controls all of the Standing Committee level positions, allowing him to dominate politics in the Party completely.

**Table 2:** Standing Committee Arrangement in a Strongly Dominant Xi Scenario

	<b>Age in 2022</b>	<b>Xi-affiliated</b>	<b>Potential Position</b>
Xi Jinping	69	Yes	Secretary General
Zhao Leji	65	Yes	CDIC Secretary
Ding Xuexiang	60	Yes	NPC Chair
Li Qiang	63	Yes	Premier
Li Xi	66	Yes	Executive Vice Premier
Chen Min'er	62	Yes	CPPCC Chair
Huang Kunming	66	Yes	Propaganda Tsar

The above analysis presents two extreme ends of a spectrum, and it is entirely possible that an intermediate scenario may emerge whereby Li Keqiang remains in the Standing Committee while Wang Yang and Wang Huning retire. Alternatively, Li Keqiang, Wang Yang and Wang Huning may all retire, but Hu Chunhua is elevated to take the premier position, making him the lone non-Xi official in the Standing Committee. In any event, it is all but certain that the “weakly dominant” scenario is the minimum one for Xi at the 20th Party Congress. It is hard to imagine a situation where Xi, if only two seats in the Standing Committee were vacated, would choose someone other than his trusted followers to fill them. Even if he were to obtain five vacated seats, he at most would offer one of the seats to someone not in his faction, again perhaps Hu Chunhua.

### **Implications for the Politburo and the 21st Party Congress**

Whether the weak or strong Xi dominance model plays out at the 20th Party Congress will have implications for policymaking in the next five years, and will also have longer-term implications for Politburo positions and promotions at the 21st Party Congress in 2027. If Xi remains weakly dominant, policymaking will be a stronger version of policymaking today with Xi dictating all of the major trends in the Party and government. Yet, because senior leaders from other factions remain in office, they still have some room to interpret political dictates from the highest level when implementing policies.

One can see the pro-market orientation of Li Keqiang as a selective interpretation of the full agenda laid out at the 19th Party Congress. In the strongly dominant case, Xi followers, all of whom had obtained their positions by displaying strict loyalty to Xi, will devote considerable efforts to finding out Xi’s policy preferences and implementing policies in fulfilment of these preferences, regardless of other considerations. This tendency may be especially strong among younger officials in Xi’s camp, such as Chen Min’er, who looks forward to another term in high office after 2027.

In terms of personnel, a weakly dominant Standing Committee will leave the door open for officials from the other factions to get to high-level positions in the Politburo after the 20th Party Congress. Although the Xi faction will likely dominate the personnel process, the other factions at least retain some bargaining power. In the meantime, fewer Xi followers will get the chance to enter the Standing Committee and Politburo because many face retirement age by 2027.

Obviously, if the strong dominance outcome takes place at the 20th Party Congress, there will be more vacancies at the Politburo level which then can be filled with even more junior members of Xi’s faction or followers of Xi’s close

associates. As it stands, we already know that Ma Xingrui, an official who has never worked closely with Xi (but who may have close ties with first lady Peng Liyuan), is a likely candidate for a Politburo seat as the newly appointed secretary of Xinjiang. There are also strong rumours that long-time Xi follower and National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) chairman He Lifeng, may be promoted to the vice-premier position, making him a Politburo member.

To watch over the security services, it is all but certain that either Chen Yixin or Wang Xiaohong, both long-time Xi followers, will take over as the secretary of the Law and Politics Committee, again a Politburo seat. If the Party maintains its informal rule to have at least one woman in the Politburo, former Tsinghua University Party Secretary Chen Xu, who was recently promoted vice-director of the Central Committee United Front Department, may become the lone woman in the Politburo, replacing Sun Chunlan. In a strongly dominant Xi scenario, officials with weaker ties to Xi, or only ties to followers of Xi such as foreign ministry Party Secretary Qi Yu and Central Liaison Department head Song Tao, also will receive Politburo seats.

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