

The 19th Central Committee Politburo

Alice Miller

The 19th CCP Congress and the new Central Committee it elected followed longstanding norms in appointing a new party Politburo. The major exception was the failure to appoint candidates to the Politburo Standing Committee who would succeed to the posts of party general secretary and PRC premier in 2022.

Appointments to the new Politburo and its standing committee, as well as to other top leadership bodies, emerged from the 19th Central Committee's First Plenum on 25 October 2017, as reported by the plenum communiqué and as transmitted by the state news agency Xinhua the same day. The 19th Central Committee was itself elected at 19th CCP Congress, held 18-24 October, which also heard reports on the work of the outgoing 18th Central Committee and Central Commission for Discipline Inspection delivered by General Secretary Xi Jinping and by party discipline chief Wang Qishan, respectively.

The New Politburo

As Table 1 shows, the turnover of members from the outgoing Politburo to the new one rivals the generational transfer of membership at the last party congress in 2012 and exceeds that at the last mid-term party congress, the 17th in 2007. Including former Chongqing party boss Sun Zhengcai, who was removed for corruption in the months preceding the 19th Congress, 15 members of the 18th Central Committee Politburo stepped down and were replaced by 15 new members.

Table 1: Turnover of Politburo Members, 2002-2017

	2002	2007	2012	2017
Politburo (total)	14 of 22	13 of 25	15 of 25	15 of 25
Standing Committee	6 of 7	4 of 9	7 of 9	5 of 7
Regular members	8 of 15	9 of 16	8 of 16	10 of 18*

*Includes Sun Zhengcai.

Despite widespread speculation that the age 68 retirement norm (七上八下) would be set aside at the congress to enable Xi Jinping crony Wang Qishan to remain on the Politburo, it was in fact upheld. All 11 members of the 18th Central Committee Politburo who had reached the age of 68 or older by the time of the congress retired. In addition, three more members who had not reached 68 also retired from the Politburo—Li Yuanchao, Liu Qibao, and Zhang Chunxian.¹ The age-68 norm has thus been sustained consistently since it was established at the 16th Congress in 2002.

Table 2 lists the new Politburo membership together with their age, generational cohort (explained below), and positions elsewhere in the political system.

Table 2: 19th Central Committee Politburo Membership**Standing Committee (rank order)**

Xi Jinping (64/5.0)	CCP general secretary; chairman, CCP & PRC CMC; PRC president.
Li Keqiang (62/5.5)	State Council premier.
Li Zhanshu (67/5.0)	(Chairman, NPC).
Wang Yang (62/5.5)	(Chairman, CPPCC).
Wang Huning (62/5.5)	Executive secretary, Secretariat; director, Policy Research Office.
Zhao Leji (60/5.5)	Chairman, Discipline Inspection Commission.
Han Zheng (63/5.0)	(Executive vice premier).

Regular Members (18 members, stroke order)

Ding Xuexiang (55/6.0)	Director, CC General Office. [
Wang Chen (67/5.0)	(NPC SC vice chairman).
Liu He (65/5.0)	(Vice premier?).
Xu Qiliang (67/5.0)	Vice chairman, CMC.
Sun Chunlan (67/5.0)	(Vice premier?).
Li Xi (61/5.5)	Secretary, Guangdong CP.
Li Qiang (58/5.5)	Secretary, Shanghai CP.
Li Hongzhong (61/5.5)	Secretary, Tianjin CP. [Shandong.
Yang Jiechi (67/5.0)	(State councilor?).
Yang Xiaodu (64/5.0)	Executive vice chairman, CDIC.
Zhang Youxia (67/5.0)	Vice chairman, CMC.
Chen Xi (64/5.0)	Director, CC Organization Dept; president, Central Party School.
Chen Quanguo (62/5.5)	Secretary, Xinjiang AR CP.
Chen Miner (57/6.0)	Secretary, Chongqing CP.
Hu Chunhua (54/6.0)	(Vice premier?).
Guo Shengkun (63/5.0)	Director, CC Politics & Law Commission.
Huang Kunming (61/5.5)	Director, CC Propaganda Dept.
Cai Qi (62/5.5)	Secretary, Beijing CP.

Li Zhanshu's presumed appointment as NPC chairman and Wang Yang's as CPPCC chairman are inferred from their position in the Politburo Standing Committee's rank order. Other posts listed in parentheses are presumed and await confirmation at the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) and the 13th Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in March 2018. Wang Chen has served as NPC Standing Committee vice chairman and secretary-general since appointment at the 12th NPC in March 2013, and he will presumably be reappointed to those posts.

The State Council Executive Committee normally includes four vice premiers and five state councilors, in addition to the premier. In recent decades, all four vice premiers have held concurrent positions on the Politburo, with the executive vice premier serving on the

Politburo Standing Committee. State councilors have not had concurrent posts on the Politburo.

After Han Zheng, how the remaining four Politburo members apparently slated for State Council or posts next March—Yang Jiechi, Liu He, Sun Chunlan, and Hu Chunhua—will be slotted is not clear. If past appointment patterns continue to hold, three could become vice premiers and one could become State Council secretary-general, a position that has sometimes merited a Politburo seat. Yang Jiechi has served as state councilor for foreign relations without a concurrent seat on the Politburo since 2013. His inclusion in the Politburo now suggests either that Yang will be promoted to vice premier next March—the first time a vice premier will have been in charge of foreign relations since Qian Qichen in 1992-2002—or he will be reappointed as state councilor but now with Politburo standing. Each of remaining three is a plausible candidate for appointment as a vice premier or secretary-general.

Institutional Balancing

If the preceding projections for NPC and State Council appointments are correct, then appointments to the new Politburo will have followed the norm of institutional balancing observed in recent decades. Since the 1990s, Politburo members (leaving aside the heads of the four main institutional hierarchies—the party, the NPC, the State Council and the CPPCC) have been carefully apportioned among concurrent posts in the party apparatus, in state posts, and as regional party chiefs. In addition, members serving in the military and security sectors have been severely limited to the two vice chairmen of the Central Military Commission and a single leader serving on the party Politics and Law Committee. Tables 3, 4 and 5 show the balance of institutional blocs in the Politburo in 2007, 2012, and 2017.

Table 3

Representation of Institutional Blocs on the 17th Central Committee Politburo (2007)

<i>Party apparatus</i>	<i>State organs</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Military/Security</i>
Li Changchun	Li Keqiang	Wang Lequan	Zhou Yongkang
Xi Jinping	Wang Zhaoguo	Liu Qi	
He Guoqiang	Wang Qishan	Wang Yang	Gen. Xu Caihou
Wang Gang	Hui Liangyu	Zhang Gaoli	Gen. Guo Boxiong
Liu Yunshan	Liu Yandong	Yu Zhengsheng	
Li Yuanchao	Zhang Dejiang	Bo Xilai	

Table 4

Representation of Institutional Blocs on the 18th Central Committee Politburo (2012)

<i>Party apparatus</i>	<i>State organs</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Military/Security</i>
Liu Yunshan	Zhang Gaoli	Sun Chunlan	Meng Jianzhu
Wang Qishan	Ma Kai	Sun Zhengcai	
Liu Qibao	Li Jianguo	Zhang Chunxian	Fan Changlong

Zhao Leji	Liu Yandong	Hu Chunhua	Guo Boxiong
Li Zhanshu	Li Yuanchao	Guo Jinlong	
Wang Huning	Wang Yang	Han Zheng	

Table 5

Representation of Institutional Blocs on the 19th Central Committee Politburo (2017)

<i>Party apparatus</i>	<i>State organs</i>	<i>Regional</i>	<i>Military/Security</i>
Wang Huning	Han Zheng	Li Xi	Guo Shengkun
Zhao Leji	Wang Chen	Li Qiang	
Ding Xuexiang	Sun Chunlan	Li Hongzhong	Gen. Xu Qiliang
Yang Xiaodu	Yang Jiechi	Chen Quanguo	Gen. Zhang Youxia
Chen Xi	Hu Chunhua	Chen Miner	
Huang Kunming	Liu He	Cai Qi	

This balancing of institutional clusters appears intended to limit any single bloc from dominating the others in the Politburo, especially in league with the general secretary, and so help to stabilize collective leadership. This practice parallels similar balancing in the Soviet party Politburo in the Brezhnev era.

Attributes

Taken as a group, the new Politburo membership features several attributes—age, military service, and education level--that replicate or complement those of previous memberships in the reform era.

Age. The average age of the new Politburo's members is 62, which sustains the average of recent decades. The average age on appointment to the Politburo at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 was 61, 62 at the 17th in 2007, 60 at the 16th in 2002, and 63 at the 15th in 1997. By contrast, the average on appointment to the Politburo at the 12th Party Congress in 1982, when Deng Xiaoping and others in his reform-inclined coalition of party veterans consolidated power, was 72. The subsequent reduction of average age of Politburo members that emerged in the 1990s was the product of a deliberate effort by Deng to institutionalize leadership turnover by imposing term limits in high-level government posts and retirement norms in the party.

Military Experience. The new Politburo membership is almost entirely civilian. The new Politburo includes the two military professionals serving vice chairmen of the Central Military Commission (CMC), as has every Politburo since the 13th in 1987. In addition, four have military experience via prior service: Xi Jinping, who served on the CMC staff under Geng Biao in 1979-1980; Xinjiang party chief Chen Quanguo, who served four years in a PLA artillery regiment in the early 1970s; party propaganda chief Huang Kunming, who served three years as an infantryman in the mid-1970s; and Tianjin party boss Li Hongzhong, who was a company commander in the People's Militia in the mid-1970s.

The heavily civilian make-up of the new Politburo continues a major departure in civil-military relations since the 1980s. The following table underscores how starkly civilian the party's top political leadership has become since the 1990s at a time when the PLA was becoming thoroughly professionalized.

Table 6

Military Experience among Politburo Members, 1997-2012

Politburo	Professional military	Prior military service	No military service
15th (1997)	2	1 (Zeng Qinghong)	21
16th (2002)	2	2 (Zeng Qinghong, Chen Liangyu)	21
17th (2007)	2	1 (Xi Jinping)	22
18th (2012)	2	2 (Xi Jinping, Zhang Chunxian)	21

By contrast, in the 12th Central Committee Politburo appointed in 1982 when Deng Xiaoping consolidated power, 20 had prior military experience and six (aside from Deng himself) continued to serve in military positions.

From the broadest perspective, the 1990s transformation from a veteran revolutionary political leadership that was concurrently a military elite to a political elite increasingly regenerated according to institutionalized promotion and retirement norms, educational background, and managerial and technical expertise on one hand and a professionalized military brass and officer corps on the other was a watershed in China's civil-military relations. Deng Xiaoping engineered this transformation both in service to his vision of what China's economic development and national defense required, but also to confine use of the military as a base of power in leadership politics. The impact of this transformation has been that the informal personal ties between political and military leaders that dominated civil-military relations up through the 1980s have increasingly been replaced by formal relationships largely within institutional channels among party, state and military institutions.

Educational Background. The new Politburo includes even fewer members holding university degrees than its predecessor, itself marking a decline from levels of the preceding Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao Politburo leaderships, as the following table shows.

Table 7

Educational Credentials of Politburo Leaderships, 1997-2017

Politburo Leadership	University degree holders	Other credentials
15th (1997) 24 members	17	
16th (2002) 25 “	21	1 military academy
17th (2007) 25 “	21	2 CPS*; 2 military academy
18th (2012) 25 “	19	5 CPS*; 1 military academy

19 th (2017) 25 “	15	1 CPS*; 2 junior college
------------------------------	----	--------------------------

*CPS = Central Party School degree.

The decline in university degree holders among the members of the two Xi Jinping Politburos reflects their coming of age during the Cultural Revolution years, which closed China's universities for long periods and stunted the educational opportunities of that generation.

What opportunities the members of the two Xi leaderships missed in the Cultural Revolution decade they made up for in gaining advanced degrees in the post-Mao period. The 2012 Xi Politburo counted 13 with advanced degrees of one kind or another, and the 2017 Politburo counts 21. The latter includes three doctorates (two in economics and one in history), two MBAs, two law degrees, and seven in economic or finance. The second Hu Jintao Politburo, appointed in 2007, was the first to count any members holding advanced degrees, with six.

The fields in which members of successive Politburos received their university degrees have become more diverse over time. Degree holders among the members of the Politburo appointed in 1997 and 2002 were overwhelmingly in technical fields—14 of 17 held degrees in engineering and two in the hard sciences in the 1997 group, and 17 of 21 held engineering degrees and one in the hard sciences in the 2002 group. Only 11 of 23 degree holders in the 2007 Politburo held degrees in technical fields, and only five did in the 2012 group. In the new Xi Politburo, only four have technical degrees, among a membership that also includes three in economics and five in the humanities (yaaay!), as well as one in traditional Chinese medicine (Yang Xiaodu).

The New Standing Committee

Selection of the five new members of the Politburo Standing Committee followed the practice of promoting from among the ranks of the members not retiring from the outgoing Politburo according to seniority. Each of the four party congresses preceding the 19th followed this practice, making it an effective norm.

The norm of selecting new Standing Committee members according to age from among non-retiring members of the outgoing body emerges clearly when the leadership is assessed using the concept of generational cohorts.² The CCP constitution mandates that national party congresses convene every five years, a stipulation that the party has rigorously observed since 1982, when the current constitution was adopted at the 12th Party Congress. This regularity in convocation of party congresses means that Politburo members serve five-year terms.

This stipulation, in combination with the age 68 retirement norm, effectively creates a calculus of retirement and succession, dividing Politburo members into cohorts based on their terms of membership and the dates of their anticipated retirement. For example, according to the age-68 retirement rule, all Politburo leaders born during the years 1930-1934 were expected to retire at the 16th Congress in 2002. Similarly, all Politburo leaders

born during the years 1935-1939 were mandated to retire at the 17th Congress in 2007, and all members born during the years 1940 and 1944 were expected to retire at the 18th Party Congress.

Following the convention of referring to Hu Jintao as the CCP's fourth generation leader and Xi Jinping as a fifth generation leader, Politburo cohorts may be grouped accordingly. Thus, because Hu served two terms as party chief, the "fourth generation" Politburo members divide into two groups—a senior group that includes those in Hu's five-year age cohort and a junior group that includes those who fall into the next five-year group. The Xi Jinping fifth generation leadership similarly divides into two—a senior cohort and a junior cohort. Using this terminology, Politburo leadership generations break down as follows:

Table 8
Recent Politburo Leadership Generations

<i>Age Cohort</i>	<i>Leadership Generation</i>	<i>Designation</i>
1930-1934	Jiang senior cohort	3.0
1935-1939	Jiang junior cohort	3.5
1940-1944	Hu senior cohort	4.0
1945-1949	Hu junior cohort	4.5
1950-1954	Xi senior cohort	5.0
1955-1959	Xi junior cohort	5.5
1960-1964	6 th generation senior cohort	6.0
1965-1969	6 th generation junior cohort	6.5

From this analysis of generational cohorts in the 17th Central Committee Politburo, the logic of Politburo Standing Committee appointments at the 18th Party Congress emerged in straightforward fashion. All 14 cohort 4.0 members of the 2007 Politburo retired, as mandated by the age 68 norm. There remained 10 members who did not retire, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9
Non-Retiring 17th CC Politburo Leaders Eligible for the 18th CC Politburo Standing Committee

<i>Leader</i>	<i>Birth Date</i>	<i>Generation</i>	<i>Expected Retirement</i>
Xi Jinping	1953	5.0	2022
Li Keqiang	1955	5.5	2027
Wang Qishan	1948	4.5	2017
Liu Yandong	1945	4.5	2017
Liu Yunshan	1947	4.5	2017
Zhang Gaoli	1946	4.5	2017
Zhang Dejiang	1946	4.5	2017

Yu Zhengsheng	1945	4.5	2017
Li Yuanchao	1950	5.0	2022
Wang Yang	1955	5.5	2027

Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang retained their seats on the Standing Committee, consistent with the intention that they succeed as party general secretary and State Council premier, respectively. Among the remaining eight, six were in cohort 4.5 and two were fifth generation leaders—Li Yuanchao (5.0) and Wang Yang (5.5). All five leaders promoted to fill out the seven-member Standing Committee came from the cohort 4.5 group. The only cohort 4.5 leader not promoted was the female state councilor Liu Yandong—a choice that it is hard not to see as a product of gender discrimination here—no girls allowed in the Politburo Standing Committee clubhouse. The two leaders from the fifth generation, Li Yuanchao and Wang Yang, were excluded simply on the basis of seniority. Politburo appointments coming out of the 15th Congress in 1997, the 16th in 2002, and the 17th in 2007 all followed the same arithmetical logic of seniority.

Standing Committee appointments coming out of the 19th Party Congress did the same. With the retirement of eleven members of the 18th Central Committee Politburo according to the age 68 norm, the retirement of another three not required to retire on grounds of age (Liu Qibao, Zhang Chunxian, and Li Yuanchao), and the purge of Sun Zhengcai, ten members remained eligible for appointment to the new Standing Committee, as shown in Table 10.

Table 10

Non-Retiring 18th CC Politburo Leaders Eligible for the 19th CC Politburo Standing Committee

<i>Leader</i>	<i>Birth Date</i>	<i>Generation</i>	<i>Expected Retirement</i>
Xi Jinping	1953	5.0	2022
Xu Qiliang	1950	5.0	2022
Sun Chunlan	1950	5.0	2022
Li Zhanshu	1950	5.0	2022
Han Zheng	1954	5.0	2022
Li Keqiang	1955	5.5	2027
Wang Huning	1955	5.5	2027
Wang Yang	1955	5.5	2027
Zhao Leji	1957	5.5	2027
Hu Chunhua	1963	6.0	2032

As expected, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang retained the Standing Committee seats. Following past precedents of excluding military leaders and women, neither General Xu

Qiliang nor Sun Chunlan was appointed to the Politburo Standing Committee. The remaining eligible 5.0 and 5.5 cohort leaders took the five open slots on the Standing Committee.

Succession

If the age-68 retirement norm continues to hold at the 20th Party Congress in 2022, twelve members of the new Politburo will retire on grounds of age. These would include three members of the Politburo Standing Committee (including Xi Jinping), together with another nine on the broader Politburo. Unless complemented by early retirement, premature death or removal of additional leaders, that number would be the smallest turnover of Politburo leadership in recent decades (see Table 1).

As has been widely speculated, Xi Jinping may not retire from his top posts in 2022. The failure of the 19th Congress to appoint two younger leaders to the Politburo Standing Committee as successors-in-training to the posts of party general secretary and State Council premier has added fuel to these speculations. Hu Jintao was appointed to the Standing Committee at the 14th Party Congress in 1992 in apparent anticipation of his succession to Jiang Zemin as general secretary in 2002. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang were appointed to the Standing Committee in 2007 in anticipation of their succession as general secretary and premier, respectively in 2012 and 2013. From this perspective, the 19th Congress has departed from the mechanisms of previous successions to top posts.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to doubt the widespread expectation that Xi Jinping is working to stay in power after 2022. For one thing, the age-68 retirement norm has held for four successive party congresses, each time adding to its force. Before the 19th Congress, it was broadly speculated that the age-68 norm would be suspended so that Xi's crony Wang Qishan could stay on the Standing Committee and preparing the way for Xi's indefinite tenure as party chief after 2022. The fact that Wang did indeed retire effectively reinforces the durability of the norm looking ahead. Violating it in 2022 would seem to entail the political cost of undermining the stability of a political system on which career expectations have depended for two decades in favor of arbitrary personalistic exception. If the norm is suspended for one leader, why not others?

Another reason may be that the Xi leadership has changed the old succession mechanism in favor of a new, as yet unpublicized one. A long Xinhua article published on the front page of *People's Daily* on 27 October, two days after the new leadership was appointed at the 19th Central Committee's First Plenum, described new procedures used to select the roster of candidates for the new "leadership collective" presented to the 19th Party Congress.

Early in 2017, according to the article, the Xi leadership decided to set aside the procedures used by the Hu Jintao leadership to select candidates for the new leadership preceding the 17th Party Congress in 2007 and the 18th in 2012. Under the banner of "inner-party democracy," those procedures, called "democratic recommendation" (民主推荐), had provided for a straw poll of at a meeting of Central Committee full and alternate

members, expanded to include others among the party elite. According to the *People's Daily* article, both the 2007 and 2012 meetings saw “malpractices” of perfunctory or “reckless voting” and “voting based on personal connections and favors.” Some, including purged leaders Zhou Yongkang, Sun Zhengcai, Ling Jihua and others had had campaigned for votes or engaged in vote buying.

The new process used to nominate candidates for the Politburo and its Standing Committee, the CDIC and the Secretariat preceding the 19th Congress involved recommendation of candidates through “face-to-face interviews, investigation and study.” According to the article, Xi Jinping personally interviewed 57 provincial, ministerial and theater command leaders and the members of the Politburo Standing Committee interviewed a total of 258. In addition, the members of the Central Military Commission interviewed another 32 from among the PLA’s five theater commands. In late September on the basis of these interviews, the Politburo Standing Committee composed a final list of nominations to present to the Seventh Plenum and to the 19th Congress.

The new process of “generating the new central leadership’s bodies,” *People's Daily* concluded, reflects an effort a “constantly improving the mechanism of generating the party’s and the country’s leaders” in a manner consistent with the party’s constitution and procedures.

The article’s description of the new process of nominating candidates for the party’s leadership organs gives no indication that it also engaged the issue of nominations for successors to the posts of party general secretary and State Council premier. It seems plausible, however, that in revising the process for nominations to top leadership bodies, the Xi leadership has also revised the mechanism for succession to the top posts.

Some commentary before the 19th Congress by observers in the Western and Hong Kong press predicted that successors-in-training to the top leadership posts would not be forthcoming because of dissatisfaction with the nominating processes under Hu Jintao. Specifically, appointing successors-in training to the Politburo Standing Committee at the beginning of the current general secretary’s second term effectively made him a lame duck, undercutting his ability to forge consensus making the party’s decision-making leadership. The evident paralysis in policy-making in Hu Jintao’s second term after a comparatively vigorous first term would testify to this critique.

The implication of this inference is that Xi Jinping will indeed step down as top leader at the 20th Congress in 2022 and that a new, as yet undisclosed process for selecting his successor is in the works. Were he to step down from his posts in 2022, he would nevertheless undoubtedly retain significant power through informal means via his younger cronies still on the Politburo and the residual authority of his elaborations of the party ideology.

Xi Jinping—Straight Arrow or Deviant?

As has been widely observed, the 19th Party Congress strengthened Xi Jinping's his position at the top of the leadership, adding his "thought on the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics" to the party constitution and moving several of his cronies into central leadership posts. What has been less remarked on is how much he has accomplished these gains not by circumventing or ignoring party norms and procedures but by working within them. The consolidation of Xi's base of cronies in the leadership at the 19th Congress proceeded under the same norms under which Jiang Zemin's "Shanghai gang" and of Hu Jintao's Communist Youth League group advanced at mid-tenure party congresses in 1997 and 2007, respectively. Similarly, the addition of Xi's eponymous "new era" does not depart from Deng Xiaoping's ideological framework of "socialism with Chinese characteristics; it builds on it.

Xi Jinping has often been characterized by many as departing from the institution-building agenda established by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s and elaborated under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao and, by some, as a new Mao, whose "revolutionary" anti-institutional temperament and convictions infested the politics of his day. Xi's performance at the 19th Congress suggests quite the opposite. Xi did not restore Mao's post of party chairman nor did he abolish the Politburo Standing Committee in favor of a cluster of party vice chairmen. Xi upheld the age-68 retirement norm—and in doing so, strengthened its force—and the process of appointment to the Politburo Standing Committee that had been used in the previous for party congresses. Further, Xi's push to re-centralize power in the party's central institutions did not alter the longstanding norm of institutional balancing in the Politburo. In these respects, Xi is much more a straight arrow than a deviant from Dengist institutionalism.

NOTES

I am grateful to Professor Avery Goldstein for comments on this article.

¹ Interestingly, Liu Qibao and Zhang Chunxian retired from the Politburo but not the new Central Committee.

² The implications of generational analysis for leadership transition were previously laid out in "Prospects for Leadership Solidarity," *China Leadership Monitor*, No.37 (30 April 2012), in "The New Politburo Leadership," *China Leadership Monitor*, No.40 (Winter 2013), and especially "Projecting the Next Politburo Standing Committee," *China Leadership Monitor*, No.49 (Winter 2016).