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## The Communist Dossier: 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi Jinping's Consolidation of Power and "Cult of Personality"



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### Abstract

*The Communist Party of China's (CPC) 20<sup>th</sup> Congress concluded on 20 October 2022. The Party Congress established Xi Jinping as the paramount leader. Xi's consolidation of power in the CPC over the last decade has resulted in the formation of a "Cult of Personality". This paper first delves into how a "cult of personality" formed around Xi Jinping and factional politics in China. The paper then gives an outline of the 20<sup>th</sup> Politburo Standing Committee (PSC)—its members, and their impact on future policy. The paper concludes with key takeaways from the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.*

### Key Points

- While Xi Jinping has been talking about running the party in a "Marxist-Leninist" way, he has formed a Stalinian 'Cult of Personality' around him.
- The 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of CPC marks the end of the Communist Youth League and Shanghai Clique in the Politburo and marks the beginning of the dominance of Xi-Faction in the Party. It is full of Xi's Mishū from his days as provincial leader indicating that Xi is unlikely to face any resistance in pursuing his policies.
- The Re-election of Wan Huning to the Standing Committee indicates that Xi's focus is on countering the United States.
- The party Congress also marks the return of 'ideology' in the CPC. The Party had put ideology on the back-burner since Deng Xiaoping started economic reforms. While China's leaders did mention ideology, it was mainly done as a lip service and the focus was economy. The Party Congress marks the return of 'Red China'.
- Xi's unprecedented power in the Party puts him in a unique position to peacefully solve disputes with neighbours. However, Xi's comments at the CMC Joint Command indicates that Xi is likely to escalate.



## Introduction

*“An example of making a man into a godhead, of transforming him into an infallible sage, the greatest leader, sublime strategist of all times and nations”.<sup>1</sup>*

While reading the quote, one might think that it was spoken by someone critiquing Xi Jinping and the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPC. Interestingly, these lines are part of a 66-year-old speech titled *“On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences”*, delivered by Nikita Khrushchev at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Khrushchev’s speech delved into the ‘cult leadership’ practiced by General Secretary and Premier Joseph Stalin. Khrushchev’s speech was an indictment of Stalin fostering a ‘cult of personality’ that led to mass purges in the last years of 1930s. Stalin’s purges included people from every stratum of the Soviet society and did not even spare Party elders and elites. Khrushchev, in his speech, mentioned that “of the 139 members and candidates of the Party’s Central Committee who were elected at the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress, 98 persons, i.e., 70 per cent, were arrested and shot”<sup>2</sup>; Khrushchev further disclosed that out of the 1,966 delegates of the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, 1,108 persons were arrested or shot. Khrushchev’s speech ruffled feathers everywhere— it also became one of the most significant reasons for the Sino-Soviet split.<sup>3</sup> China, at that time, was itself reeling under the ‘cult of personality’ of Mao Zedong.<sup>4</sup>

## Cult of Personality in CPC

Mao’s cult-like leadership wreaked havoc in China. Starting from the *Land Reform and Collectivisation Campaign* in 1950, Mao also started other mass campaigns like *Hundred Flowers Movement* (1956-57), the *Great Leap Forward* (1958-1962), *Socialist Education Campaign* (1963-1965)<sup>ii</sup>, *Great Cultural Revolution* (1966-1976), and *Campaign Against Capitalist Roaders* (1976). These campaigns had terrible consequences for China as they led to famines, anarchy, lawlessness, and millions of casualties.<sup>5</sup> Mao’s campaigns, like Stalin’s purges, also targeted anyone and everyone who Mao saw as a challenge to him (politically or ideologically), including purging senior leaders like Deng Xiaoping, Marshal Lin Biao, Liu Shaoqi, and Peng Dehuai.

<sup>ii</sup> **Socialist Education Campaign (1963-1965) [Shèhuìzhūyì Jiàoyù]** also known as the “Four Cleanups Movement”, is widely regarded as the precursor to the cultural revolution. Mao started the movement to ‘remove the reactionary elements within the Party’.



### ***Formation of Xi's Personality Cult***

A 'Cult of Personality' forms when a 'leader becomes larger than life; is out of the range of any critique and is depicted to be a "paramount leader" – thinker and theorist, holds unchallenged power, and is considered infallible'. Xi Jinping has achieved this status in the CPC after the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. Drawing lessons from the mass campaigns of Mao, the CPC senior leadership decided not to allow a Mao-style cult of personality in the future.<sup>6</sup> While the CPC did not publicly criticise Mao like the CPSU did Stalin, it did learn its lessons of having a 'cult of personality'. The Party under Deng Xiaoping decided to enforce measures and norms that would avoid any future leader from getting power on the same lines as Mao, and decided to limit the term of the President to five year term, extendable by another five year. . Deng Xiaoping also introduced the concept of "collective leadership"— a norm that was followed by subsequent Presidents. However, Xi gradually eroded the norms and rules set by Deng and effectively put an end to the concept of "collective leadership". Albeit Xi did not achieve the 'cult of personality' overnight— it has taken him a decade to overcome factional rivalries, political purges, and ideological reorientation.

This section discusses three variables that are significant in the formation of a 'Xi-Cult of Personality'.

- ***Political Purges.*** Xi was elevated to the post of General Secretary at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 2012. Delivering his first speech as General Secretary, a day after the conclusion of the Party Congress, Xi set the tone for the style of his upcoming leadership. Indicating that countering corruption and instilling Party discipline would be his primary objective. Xi stated:

In the new situation our party faces many severe challenges, and there are many pressing problems within the party that needs to be resolved, especially problems such as corruption and bribe-taking by some party members and cadres, being out of touch with the people, placing undue emphasis on formality and bureaucracy must be addressed with great effort.<sup>7</sup>



In his report to the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress, Xi Jinping while talking about corruption stated:

We have taken coordinated steps to see that officials do not have the audacity, opportunity, or desire to be corrupt, and we have used a combination of measures to take out tigers, swat flies, and hunt down foxes punishing corrupt officials of all types.<sup>8</sup>

Xi's comments glorifies that during the last decade of his rule, the anti-corruption campaign has punished corrupt officials without fear and favour. According to the official figures from Central Commission for Discipline Inspection<sup>iii</sup>, so far four million officials have been prosecuted on corruption charges. The prosecuted officials consist of 392 officials at the provincial level, 17,000 at the county level, and 616,000 at the township level.<sup>9</sup> The anti-corruption campaign investigated party officials and, although it investigated people in positions of power, the people closest to the General Secretary were given virtual immunity despite being accused of graft.<sup>10</sup>

Historically, mass campaigns in China have been used as a tool to persecute dissidents and political & ideological opponents. Xi's *Anti-Corruption Campaign* (2012-present) has been the longest campaign by any leader since the *Great Cultural Revolution* (1966-1976). Xi has used the anti-corruption campaign to target political and military leaders who he saw as opponents (political or ideological). The anti-corruption campaign over the last decade has helped Xi in consolidating power within the party and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

- **Ending Factional Politics.** Factional politics have been a part and parcel of the CPC since its inception. Although, there has been a continuous power struggle between different factions within the CPC, the factions have always been adjusted in the power hierarchy by Presidents since the time of Deng Xiaoping. During Xi's first term as President, the Politburo was dominated by the *Communist Youth League*<sup>iv</sup> (CYL) [Tuánpài; 团派] Faction led by the former General Secretary Hu Jintao. Hu Jintao, during the time of his retirement, had spent over two decades in the Politburo

<sup>iii</sup> Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) is one of the most powerful internal bodies of CPC. CCDI is tasked with enforcing Party discipline, internal rules and combating corruption within the Party. Li Xi has been selected to head the CCDI after the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, a post that was held by his standing committee colleague Zhao Leji.

<sup>iv</sup> Communist Youth League Faction or *Tuanpai* is a term used to describe leaders in the CPC who rose to prominence in the Party and have their political origins in the Communist Youth League (CYL). The CYL is as old as the CPC. The Youth League is run by the Party for youth between the age of 14 and 28 thus making it one of the oldest and most powerful faction in CPC.



Standing Committee (PSC) of the CPC, which allowed him to strengthen the CYL faction and advance the careers of his fellow factionists. Hu strengthened the hold of the CYL faction in CPC by following the tactic of ‘surrounding the centre’ where he appointed people of the CYL faction as Party Secretary (s) in regions surrounding Beijing.<sup>11</sup>

Xi started his crusade against the CYL faction a year before the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (2017). Xi termed the CYL as an organisation that was “paralyzed from the waist down”.<sup>12</sup> Xi’s assessment of CYL was widely circulated internally. Speaking at a conference towards the end of 2015, Xi further lambasted CYL stating that it ran the risk of:

....being marginalized by young people and being marginalized by the Party-state.<sup>13</sup>

After giving lip service to strike at the CYL faction, the next step was for the CCDI to begin investigating the CYL faction.

Xi also used the anti-corruption campaign to strike against CYL—the first CYL causality was Zhou Yongkang, who was member of the PSC. Incidentally, he was also the first member of PSC, after the ‘*Gang of Four*’, to be put on trial and was formally charged in 2015 for gross “abuse of power”. Zhou was prosecuted and found guilty in a ‘closed-door’ trial wherein he was sentenced to life in prison, for bribery and espionage.<sup>14</sup> The second big leader of the CYL to be prosecuted was Ling Jihua, a former senior aide to Hu Jintao, head of the Party’s United Front Work Department (UFWD), and Vice Chairman of the Chinese People Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Ling was charged with bribery, illegally obtaining state secrets and abuse of power. Ling took a guilty plea, and was sentenced to life in prison. Apart from prosecuting CYL leaders in National Congress, Xi also ordered to cut the personnel deployment in CYL units (both at the central and regional levels).<sup>15</sup> Xi’s contentious crusade against the CYL has weakened the faction over time. The CYL was finally ousted by Xi from top leadership positions in the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.<sup>16</sup> Senior CYL leaders like Li Keqiang, Wang Yang, Hu Chunhua, and Lu Hao will be stepping down from the National People’s Congress (NPC) in 2023.



Another powerful faction within the CPC was the Shanghai Clique<sup>v</sup> headed by Jiang Zemin. Xi followed the same tactics against the Shanghai clique. He targeted Shanghai clique leaders using the CCDI. The first big leader belonging to the Shanghai clique who was prosecuted was General Xu Caihou. General Xu was the Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) at the time of his investigation and thus became the highest ranking officer in PLA history to be investigated for corruption. Xu was charged with abuse of power and accepting bribes through family members. He finally “confessed”<sup>17</sup> in October 2014 after he was expelled from the Party in June 2014. Xi similarly prosecuted other Shanghai clique leaders and steadily weakened the faction. The Shanghai faction got its final blow during the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress with all the top leadership posts touted to be filled by Xi’s loyalists.

- **Creation of Xi Faction.** Factions are an important part of political leadership especially in a closed political system with one-Party rule, Oligarchy, or Theocracy. China is a one-Party State i.e., CPC. The CPC has been an active breeding ground of factional politics since its inception— there have been reformists, the Mao faction, the Deng faction, the CYL, and the Shanghai gang. Usually, there is a power struggle between different factions wherein one faction prevails and rules. However, at times, ‘disruptive leaders’ emerges who overpowers the existing factional hierarchy and forms his faction. Xi Jinping has become that ‘disruptive leader’. Xi has weakened the two oldest factions of the CPC viz the CYL and the Shanghai Clique and in turn, has formed his faction.

The Xi-faction comprises people who have served under him during his stint as a provincial Party leader in Hebei, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai. Xi-faction also consists of people who shares ties with Xi through by virtue of their place of origin i.e. Shaanxi. The Xi-Faction is primarily made up of four gangs—Zhejiang Gang<sup>vi</sup>,

<sup>v</sup> Shanghai Clique also referred to as Shanghai Gang [Shànghǎi bāng; 上海帮] indicating a group of leaders in CPC who rose to prominence under former General Secretary Jiang Zemin while he served as the Party Secretary of Shanghai.

<sup>vi</sup> Zhejiang Gang refers to the leaders in the CPC who served under Xi Jinping while he was the Party Secretary in Zhejiang. These leaders have become a consequential part of the Sixth Generation Leaders even if they have no special qualities.





Shaanxi Gang<sup>vii</sup>, Fujian Gang, and Military-industry Gang.<sup>viii</sup> The Faction got a complete hold of power in the 20<sup>th</sup> PSC replacing the CYL and Shanghai clique. Of the five 20<sup>th</sup> PSC members, four are from Xi-Faction and the fifth one is a party ideologue without a faction. Even in the larger Politburo, 13 members are a direct part of Xi-faction and the remaining 7 have no clear faction, thus giving Xi-faction a dominating position.

- **Ideological Orientation/Re-orientation.** When a leader becomes “paramount” and infallible, he needs strong ideological or revolutionary undertones. Mao became a paramount leader due to his leadership in the ‘Chinese Communist Revolution.’ Even after the end of the Revolution and the establishment of CPC rule over China, Mao looked at everything through the lens of ‘Marxism’ and ‘Leninism’. Mao’s ideological thoughts were enshrined in *Mao’s Little Red Book* during the ‘Cultural Revolution’ (1966-1976). The book became a compulsory reading for the “Red Guards”<sup>ix</sup> [*Hóng Wèibīng*; 红卫兵] and other communists in China during the Cultural Revolution. Further ‘Mao-Tsetung Thought’ was added to China’s Constitution in 1975 through an amendment.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Deng Xiaoping got relevance due to the “Deng Xiaoping Theory”. Deng Xiaoping took over a battered China in 1980. While Mao’s thoughts were mostly relegated to political ideology, Deng’s theory took a more holistic view and included both political and economic ideologies. The most significant part of Deng’s theory came during the 12<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in September 1982. During the Party Congress, Deng raised the subject of “Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”.<sup>19</sup> Socialism with Chinese Characteristics still has relevance in contemporary China as even Xi Jinping frequently uses this term. Deng Xiaoping’s next significant theory was the “24 character strategy”. The strategy was:

<sup>vii</sup> Shaanxi Gang refers to the leaders in the CPC, who were either born in Shaanxi or are natives by family origin. These leaders have emerged at the power centre of Beijing since Xi assumed leadership in China.

<sup>viii</sup> Military-Industry Gang consists of technocrats with roots in the military-technology sector and have also become a part of the politburo.

<sup>ix</sup> Red Guards were student-led mass ‘paramilitary’ movement mobilised and guided by Mao during the initial phase of the Cultural Revolution. Eventually, the Red Guards got out of control and had to be controlled by the PLA.



Observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capabilities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.

This strategy became a mantra for future China leaders and was largely followed by them before Xi Jinping. Deng Xiaoping theory further got enshrined into China's Constitution during the Second Session of the 9<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress (NPC) in 1999.

After Deng Xiaoping, Xi Jinping is the first President whose thoughts found relevance in CPC and has been added to the Constitution. Xi Jinping's thought on "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" was adopted into the Constitution during the 19<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress. Ideology has always been a significant factor in the functioning of the CPC. Soon Deng Xiaoping's Theory of 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' started to get compromised by the CPC for greater economic growth. However, things started changing with Xi Jinping. Xi becoming the President of China in 2013, saw the return of the ideological man in China's politics. This was evident from Xi's writings in 2013 that re-emphasized on the Party's Leninist control on Chinese politics. Xi's thoughts further got emboldened after the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2017 where he redefined the uncontrolled 'reform and opening up'. Xi's Marxist-Leninist tones are overtly presented in the report. Further, the word 'Marxism has been referred to 31 times in the report'<sup>20</sup> which is more than double the number it was referred to in the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress indicating a shift towards ideological principles.

Xi Jinping, in the last decade has reoriented the party towards its ideological roots. Albeit the CPC had become a governing party<sup>21</sup> [Zhízhèng dǎng; 执政党]; Xi Jinping seems to be making the party a revolutionary party again [Gémìng dǎng; 革命党].

### **Xi Jinping's consolidation of Power**

Post assuming the post of the President in 2013, Xi Jinping started his quest to consolidate power while putting an end to Deng's "collective leadership" norm. Xi consolidated power by putting his 'favoured men' in positions of power in Beijing— appointing Central Military Commission (CMC) members closer to him and appointing his trusted leaders as Party Secretaries in important provinces like Beijing, Shanghai, Hebei, Fujian, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Guangzhou, and Shandong. These leaders formed the bedrock of Xi Jinping's power. Xi appointed people from his inner circle like the Shaanxi Gang, Zhejiang Gang, and



people who worked under him during his time in Hebei, Fujian, and Shanghai. Xi indulged in a power struggle with the ‘Youth League’ dominated by Hu Jintao and the ‘Shanghai clique’ dominated by Jiang Zemin in 2016, where he was successful in instilling his people into positions of power thereby forming a new faction i.e. the “Xi faction”.

Xi further attacked Deng’s legacy by introducing an amendment in China’s Constitution in 2018 that abolished the term limit for President and allowed him to rule indefinitely. The amendment was passed by the National People’s Congress overwhelmingly with 2,958 voting in favour, 2 opposing and 3 abstaining.<sup>22</sup>

China has returned to the “Cult of Personality” era again at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress (16-20 October 2022) with Xi Jinping appointing loyalists and ‘yes men’ to the Standing Committee. Xi broke many norms to ‘modify’ the party Congress to his advantage. It is the first time that a Vice Premier has not been promoted to the Premiership and instead an outsider has been appointed as the Premier. Xi also excluded the powerful ‘Youth League’ from any position of power. Leaders like Vice Premier, Hu Chunhua (once seen as the future president) were not only excluded from the standing committee but also from the larger Politburo.<sup>23</sup>

In Xi’s new standing committee, there is no place for dissenters or reformers. The new premier— Li Qiang, is an old associate of Xi from his time in Zhejiang. Zhao Leji is a loyalist who has served Xi with full vigour as the head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. Furthermore, Xi and Leji share family ties. Wan Huning is an old party ideologue who puts the primacy of the Party before reforms. Cai Qi is one of the oldest associates of Xi, who has worked with him since 1995. Ding Xuexiang is the youngest member of the standing committee who worked under Xi in Shanghai. Li Xi became the new Head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. The standing committee is full of ‘Xi-loyalists’ and hence, will be fully dominated by Xi’s thoughts and vision. Any dissent from the members is unlikely.

Apart from Leji, none of the remaining six members of the Standing Committee, except Wang Huning, have any connection or ties to factions like Xi had. The new Standing Committee is full of men who have no independent power, thus making “Xi the source of their power”.

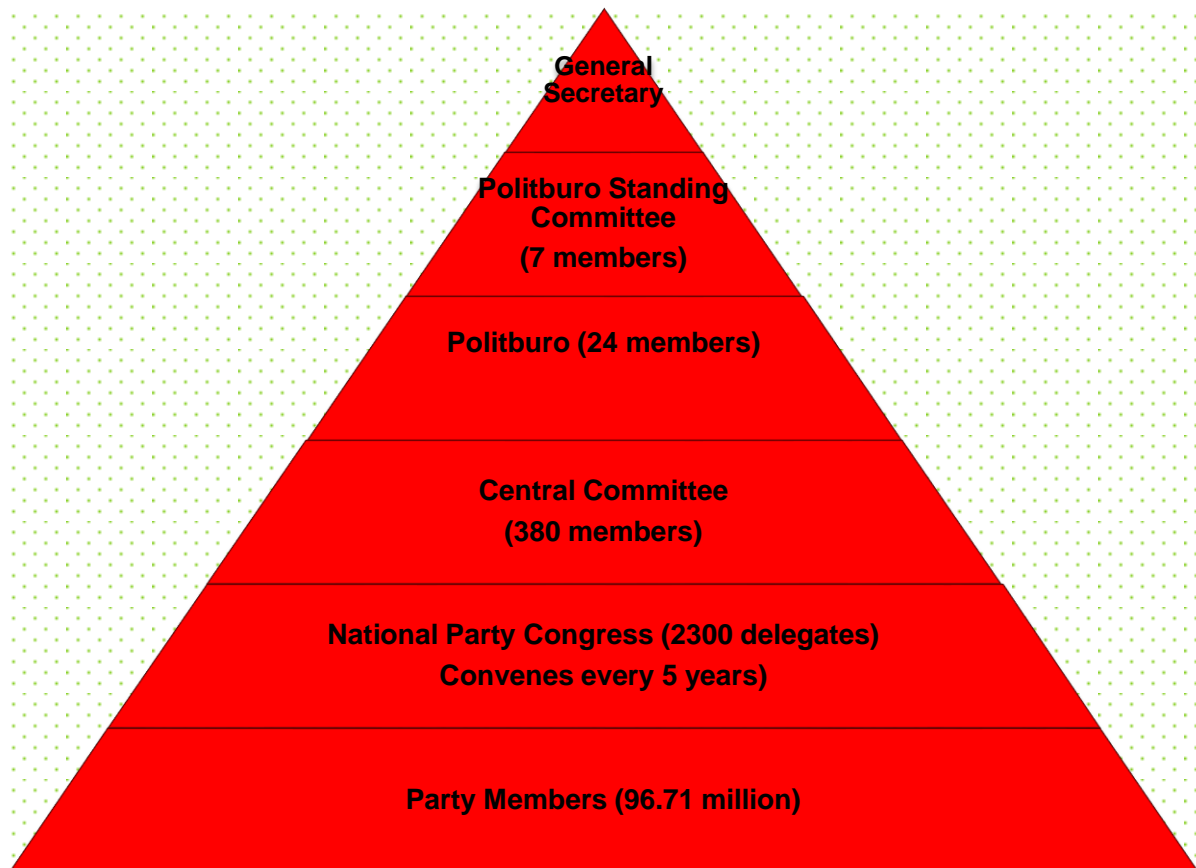


Xi has become the most powerful man in China since Mao and has been defined as the modern ‘emperor’. China was a diminished power during the period of Mao, but still, he had a profound impact on world politics. Modern day China is on the cusp of becoming a great power and with Xi exercising unbridled power, it brings forth an uncertain period in geopolitics. As China has attained some form of economic power, Xi’s next agenda can be attaining what he thinks is his ‘civilisational duty’— to include the “reunification” of Taiwan with “mainland China”, reinforce Chinese sovereignty over the South China Sea (under the Nine-Dash Line), Senkaku Islands with Japan, taking parts of claimed areas in Bhutan<sup>x</sup>, “taking back” Tawang of Arunachal Pradesh (India), and parts Sikkim<sup>xi</sup> & Ladakh of India. Another ‘civilisational duty’ that Xi considers his pejorative is establishing regional dominance, close to the ancient regional centrality of ‘*Tianxia*’ [天下]. Following the establishment of ‘*Tianxia*’ Xi’s next goal is to take China to the centre stage of the world, fulfilling the real meaning of *Zhōnghuá* [中华].

Xi’s absolute dominance in the Standing Committee and lack of any opposition among the elites in China plays big role in Xi’s attempt to realise his ‘civilisational duty’. The individuals profiled in this dossier will be Xi’s deputies to fulfil his ambitions.

<sup>x</sup> China has claims over 764 sq Km of Bhutanese territory. It claims Doklam, Sinchulung, Dramana and Shakhatoe in the northwestern region and Pasamlung and Jakralung valleys in the central part of Bhutan.

Figure 1: CPC Political Hierarchy



Source: Annotated by Author

### The Standing Committee

- **Li Qiang.** Li Qiang has been a longtime associate of Xi Jinping. Li's first association with Xi Jinping was as his Chief of Staff in 2004 when Xi was the Party Secretary in Zhejiang. Li Qiang is part of the infamous "New Zhejiang Army"<sup>24</sup>(also referred to as the 'Xi Jinping Faction'). Li joined the communist party in 1983; Li's first leadership role was as the governor of Zhejiang from 2012-2016. Starting from 2016, Li Qiang

held the post of Party Secretary of Jiangsu. Since 2017, Li had been the Party Secretary of Shanghai.

Li Qiang is all set to assume the position of the Premier of the PRC in March 2023 after the current premier— Li Keqiang officially retires. Historically, the post of the Premier in China did not have much influence over politics except when Zhou Enlai was the Premier. The Premier in China is more in charge of the economy and plays very little role in politics. While there were incidents of dissent<sup>25</sup> against Xi when Li Keqiang was the Premier, it is highly unlikely that there will be any sign of dissent with Li Qiang as the Premier. However, one possible advantage of Li Qiang, becoming the premier is that, being Xi loyalist, his policies and statements can be interpreted as Xi's stand rather than as a 'separate line' as it was done when Li Keqiang was Premier.

On the political front, Qiang was responsible for severe 'lockdowns' and 'curbs' in Shanghai under the "Zero covid policy". Li Qiang's appointment as the Premier was surprising for a lot of non-Chinese China watchers due to his role in the Shanghai lockdowns. His elevation to the post of Premier has also broken a 48-year tradition set by Deng Xiaoping in 1976 wherein the Vice Premier was always made the Premier. Additionally, Li Qiang has no experience in central leadership, which can make his work difficult as the Premier.

- **Zhao Leji.** Zhao is one of the two members retained from the previous Standing Committee wherein he served as the Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. Zhao is also a member of Xi's inner circle and belongs to the Shaanxi Gang.<sup>xii</sup> Zhao, in all possibility, will assume the post of Chairman of the National People's Congress (in charge of legislating).

Leji was born in March 1957 in Xining city, Qinghai province. He became a part of the "sent-down youth"<sup>xiii</sup> during the cultural revolution (1966-1976). Leji joined the Communist Party in 1975. His first leadership position was that of Party Secretary of

<sup>xii</sup> **Shaanxi Gang** refers to the leaders of the CPC, who were either born in Shaanxi or are natives by family origin. These leaders have emerged at the power centre of Beijing since Xi has assumed leadership in China.

<sup>xiii</sup> **"Sent-down youths"** (插队知青;) refers to the urban educated Chinese who were sent to rural China to serve as manual labour during the cultural revolution (1966-1976).



Qinghai from 2003-2007. From Qinghai, Leji moved to Shaanxi and served in the same designation till 2012. After Xi Jinping became President, Leji moved to the central leadership role and served as the head of the Organization Department of the Chinese Communist Party from 2012-2017. In 2017, Leji was promoted to become the Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection wherein he served as the 'enforcer' of Xi's anti-corruption campaign.

Albeit, unverified, there are reports that Xi and Zhao shares familial ties.<sup>26</sup> Due to strong familial connection and Zhao's tenure in the Discipline Commission, Zhao can be seen as a loyal ally of Xi.

- **Wang Huning.** Wang Huning also was a member of the Previous Standing Committee. A former Professor of International Politics at Fudan University<sup>xiv</sup> and Party Ideologue, Huning started his career in 1995 as the Director of the research team at the Party's Central Policy Research Office (CPRO). Huning has the distinct claim of being the only leader who has been favoured by all three of the recent General Secretaries of the communist party. Huning was inducted into the Standing Committee in 2017 and since then, he has been holding the important position of being the Head of the Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideology (2017-present). Huning is also the Deputy Head of other important groups like the Group for Party Building work (2017-present), the Central Comprehensive Reform Committee (2018-present), the Central Integrated Military-Civilian Development Committee (2018-present), and the Central Cyberspace Affairs Committee (2018-present).

With bipartisan support from all factions and leaders of the CPC throughout his career, Huning has earned the nickname of "Chief Advisor of Zhongnanhai" and "China's Kissinger".<sup>27</sup> Under Xi Jinping, Huning has been credited with the assertive direction of China's foreign policy.<sup>28</sup> Huning believes in the 'primacy of the Party in China's growth'. Huning also believes that the 'Party' stability and power should take precedence over reform'. This thought has become a part of the growing rhetoric of the Party.<sup>29</sup> Huning, a firm believer of China's political system, theorised China as an 'authoritarian alternative' to the West' failing democratic order.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>xiv</sup> Fudan University in China focuses mainly on Research on Developed Countries. Wang Huning is an ideologue, and his research focuses on 'decay of the United States. Since, China is in a competition with the United States, Huning's re-appointment to the Standing Committee makes sense due to his research focus.



Huning's retention in the Standing Committee points towards the continuation of China's assertive diplomacy (wolf warrior diplomacy) and precedence to the Party's primacy over 'growth' and 'opening up'.

- **Cai Qi.** Cai Qi has been the oldest associate of Xi Jinping. Cai was working for the Fujian Government before Xi arrived there in 1985. When Xi became the Deputy Party Secretary of Fujian in 1995, Qi worked directly under him as the Deputy Director of the General Office. Qi also followed Xi to Zhejiang and served in various posts such as Party Secretary and Mayor when Xi was the Party Secretary of Zhejiang. Recently, Qi's undertook the coveted role of the Party Secretary of Beijing. Cai has been infamous in Beijing for "evicting migrant workers"<sup>31</sup> during the 2017 winter. Cai was also praised by the Party for successfully holding Beijing Winter Olympics earlier this year.

Apart from being Xi's Mishū {秘书, Secretary}, Cai Qi is also known for his trip to Taiwan in 2012, following which, he published a short diary. Cai Qi observed and reported all aspects of the political, cultural, and economic life of Taiwan during his visit. He attended weddings and funerals, visited schools and institutions like the Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI) and interacted with mango and banana farmers. On his return, Cai in his report, suggested a model on which China and Taiwan should build their ties.<sup>32</sup>

- **Ding Xuexiang.** Born in 1962 in Jiangsu Province, Xuexiang joined the CPC in 1984 and is the youngest member of the Standing Committee. It is rumoured that he is being groomed to succeed Xi after he retires.<sup>33</sup> Xuexiang left a very good impression on Xi during the latter's short tenure in Shanghai in 2007. It is evident by the fact that Xi promoted Xuexiang to the Chief of Staff and standing member of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee. Xuexiang was appointed as Xi's Personal Secretary [Mishū; 秘书] in 2013. He is being described as someone who "keeps a low profile while carrying out the will of his boss".<sup>34</sup>
- **Li Xi.** Li Xi is another member of the Shaanxi Gang. Li was born in 1956 in Gansu Province and joined the CPC in 1982. Like Zhao Leji, Li is also a "sent-down youth" he was sent down to Yunping's People Commune in Gansu province in 1975. Li Xi is a long-term ally and friend of Xi Jinping; their friendship is a result of Li Xi working as



the Personal Assistant of Li Ziqi and Li Ziqi was a patron of Xi Jinping's father Xi Zhongxun.<sup>xv</sup>

In his previous leadership positions, Li Xi has served as the Governor of Liaoning (2014-2015), Party Secretary of Liaoning (2015-2017), and Party Secretary of Guangdong (2017-2022). In the current Standing Committee of the CPC, Li Xi has taken over the role of the Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection from Zhao Leji. Li's previous role as the Party Secretary in Guangdong (a major economic province) has provided him with experience in economic affairs. His experience in economic affairs and proximity to Xi Jinping is likely to give him an upper hand when it comes to the economic policies of China.

**Table 1: The Xi Jinping Faction and the 20<sup>th</sup> Politburo**

20 <sup>th</sup> Politburo members	Places where Xi has served in leadership positions						Expertise
	Zhending County (1982-1983)	Hebei (1982-1985)	Fujian Faction (1985-2002)	Zhejiang (2002-2007)	Shanghai (2007)	Shaanxi Connection	
Li Qiang				✓ □			Management Engineering
Zhao Leji						Shaanxi Native	Philosophy
Wang Huning							Political Theorist
Cai Qi			✓ □				Political Economics
Ding Xuexiang					✓ □		Engineer
Li Xi						Shaanxi Gang	
Ma Xingrui							Aerospace Engineer (Military-Industrial Gang)
Wang Yi							International Politics
Yin Li							Public Health Official
Shi Taifeng							Law

<sup>xv</sup> Li Ziqi participated in the communist uprising in northwest China in the 1930s. The uprising was led by Xi's father Xi Zhongxun and Li Ziqi. Li Ziqi was purged in the 1960s and reinstated after the cultural revolution. Li Ziqi was nominated by Xi Zhongxun in 1983 as the Party Secretary of Gansu province. This is when Li Xi worked for Li Ziqi and became friends with Xi Jinping.



Liu Guozhong							Engineer (Military-Industrial Gang)
Li Ganjie							Engineer (nuclear safety) (Military-Industrial Gang)
Li Shulei							Professor (Literature)
Li Hongzhong							History
He Weidong			✓ <input type="checkbox"/>				People's Liberation Army
He Lifeng			✓ <input type="checkbox"/>				Economist
Zhang Youxia						Shaanxi Native	People's Liberation Army
Zhang Guoqing							Engineer (Military-Industrial Gang)
Chen Wenqing			✓ <input type="checkbox"/>				Law and Business
Chen Jining							Environmental Engineer
Chen Miner				✓ <input type="checkbox"/>			
Yuan Jiajun							Aerospace Engineer (Military-Industrial Gang)
Huang Kunming			✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>			

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**\*\*Note: Highlighted names are members of the Standing Committee**

### Takeaways from the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and Its Aftermath

The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress has made it clear that Xi Jinping is the 'undisputed and the most powerful leader in the CPC since Mao'. He has packed the politburo with loyalists, prevailed over factions (CYL and Shanghai clique) and established complete control over the Party. In



a way, Xi can be termed as more powerful than Mao due to China's current position (political and economic) in the world.

On the political front, Xi's work report suggests that the CPC is going "Red" again. After the conclusion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi Jinping took the PBSC on a field trip to Yanan [Yán'ān; 延安], the old revolutionary base in Shaanxi [Shǎnxī; 陕西]. During the visit Xi stated:

The purpose of the visit is for us to visit the glorious years of the Party in Yanan, in memory of the great achievements of our revolutionaries, promote the Yanan spirit, and carry forward the fighting spirit of our revolutionaries as we strive to achieve goals set out in the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.<sup>35</sup>

The symbolism of visiting Yanan immediately after the Party Congress is not lost. Yanan is also considered the 'Mecca of the Party' as it served as the site of the Party's Headquarters during its 'struggle against the Nationalists'. Yanan was also the site of the 7<sup>th</sup> National Congress in 1945 where Mao emboldened his leadership over the Party and got rid of his oppositions. Similarly, Xi has also got a complete hold over the Party (both ideologically and politically) in the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. Xi's visit points towards the return of the Party to its 'Ideological' and 'Revolutionary' roots.

On the economic front, most market reformers have either been retired or have moved out. This includes premier Li Keqiang, Vice Premier Liu He, Minister of Finance— Liu Kun, Central Bank Head— Yi Gang, and Gao Shuqing from the banking sector. With the above people exiting, He Lifeng is touted to be the next Vice Premier. Lifeng is an economist and is a strong advocate of Xi's 'economic nationalism' policies such as "Dual Circulation of Economy" and "Self-Reliance". With Lifeng at the helm of economic policy, China can become inward-looking in the economy front, focusing mainly on "Self-Reliance" rather than opening up.

On the security front, the Politburo has been filled with technocrats such as Yuan Jiajun, Zhang Guoqing, Li Ganjie, Liu Guozhong, and Ma Xingrui with ties to the military industry. This suggests Xi will continue his push for technology-driven reform in defence and "self-reliance" in critical supply chains.

Xi's unchallenged power in the CPC also gives him the incentive to pursue 'external' national security endeavours that include territorial dispute with India and Bhutan, and 'sovereignty' and 'maritime' dispute with Japan and 'maritime' dispute in the South China Sea. Xi's



position of power gives him the unique capability to solve these issues diplomatically by following a strategy of give and take. Albeit chances of this happening looks bleak, as is evidenced by Xi's remarks at the Party Congress where he stated:

We have not yielded any ground on matters of principle, and we have resolutely safeguarded China's sovereignty, security, and development interests.

Furthermore, Xi's comments on his visit to the CMC Joint Operations Command Center, where he asked the CMC to 'focus all its energy'<sup>36</sup> in preparation for war, suggests that diplomatic solutions to territorial and maritime issues might be farfetched.

While Xi's consolidation of power is being compared with Mao, it will be prudent to say that Xi's 'undisputed power' within CPC will bring about an unprecedented situation for the world at large. Contemporary China possesses much larger ability and capability than 'China of Mao's time' to influence geopolitics, economy, and governance of the world.

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