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EXPLORING ASIA:

POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

China's 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress and the Challenges of the 21st Century

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The 18th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress, concluded in mid-November 2012, selected a new leadership that will guide China for the next five to 10 years. The announcement of that leadership raises many questions about whether the reigning CCP can surmount growing challenges. Intense pressures are being exerted from multiple sources, calling on the CCP to change, but the new leadership and the CCP in general are not likely to be fully up to meeting the challenges arising from the multiple politics at play in China today.

The new top leadership has seven men forming the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). Its top leader is 59-year-old Xi Jinping (sounds like She Gin Ping — rhymes with “ring”). Top leadership seems rooted, first of all, in the politics of interests and patronage. Leadership in China in the past several decades has been largely collective and consensual; each one of these seven leaders may have a veto over controversial measures.

A retired former leader, Jiang Zemin, appears to have played a decisive role in determining the composition of the PBSC. Many are linked to that former leader, and most are in their mid- to late 60s. They tend to have worked in provinces along China's coast and are associated with policies that have pushed Chinese exports and high rates of investment, especially in real estate and infrastructure. As with all top-ranking CCP members, PBSC leaders are committed to continued dominance by the CCP and are all nationalistic. There is little that is distinctive about what they have done to date as longtime Chinese politicians.

Therefore, the default assumption is that the new leadership is unlikely to undertake major policy changes

or to open up the political system to much more input from society. The collective, consensual nature of decision making reinforces this view. After all, China now has the second-largest economy in the world, continues to grow rapidly and is recognized by most other countries as the second-most-influential state in the world. The closed-policy process has seemed to work, or so the CCP and the leadership might believe.

But while the current policies of the regime have brought many successes, those policies are coming at growing costs, by stimulating political unrest. While the CCP and PBSC are likely to protect major interests in the system and to continue decision making behind closed doors, popular outrage and a sense of injustice are growing. These powerful emotions may drive many in China to take steps that under normal circumstances are seen as rash.

Local party leaders confiscate land and houses for little or no compensation, corruption among officials affects everything, and inequality among haves and have-nots is reaching extraordinary levels. Because the CCP blocks popular input in the political system, ordinary people have no recourse but to engage in protests and demonstrations. They know these activities are highly risky — these actions are often violently suppressed, some protestors have been killed, and demonstration leaders are sentenced to long prison terms. Yet truly massive numbers of protests take place every year in China (and the numbers appear to be rapidly growing) because popular indignation has reached extraordinary levels. So far, the CCP has managed to contain these protests. But whether — or, perhaps, for how long — that can continue is a huge unknown.

Besides the opposing politics of vested interests and popular passions, there is also a third set representing what might be called a politics of imperatives pressing in on the new leadership. Respected voices within and outside China are urgently calling on the leadership to



address current unsustainable policies. They argue that China's economic growth cannot be sustained by relying on investment and exports. The key export markets are all experiencing slow growth, and in many areas China has already overbuilt housing and infrastructure. A shift to a more consumption-oriented growth path (in which Chinese consumers spur economic growth) is essential.

They are also asserting that China's environmental degradation is reaching extreme proportion — high use of electricity, generated by burning coal, is creating horrendous air pollution and public health problems. And China's water quality is arguably even worse. Perhaps even more important for its longevity, the CCP needs to also create mechanisms by which ordinary people can reflect their concerns to the government and not have them ignored. These and other imperatives all run up against the politics of interests and reflect, to a degree, some of the sources of the politics of passion.

These three kinds of politics will play off one another over the next five to 10 years in China. If the new leadership can successfully address popular outrage and various imperatives, it can ride out the coming storm. But if it cannot, dramatic developments lie ahead.



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