



China's Collective Leadership at a crossroads?

by Siv H. Oftedal

Xi Jinping may be emerging as a more profiled leader of the Chinese Communist Party than expected. It is, however, too early to draw conclusions regarding how this affects China's collective leadership.

Take aways

- **Broad policy decisions and guidelines for overall political goals in China are made through consensus and compromise in the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee, i.e. through collective decisions.**
- **Announcements in Western media that Xi Jinping has overturned the central collective leadership system have been made prematurely.**
- **We need to look to the 19th CCP National Party Congress this autumn to get a better understanding of where the collective leadership system is heading.**

This autumn the 19th National Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will convene in Beijing, and is intended to be the most important event in the Chinese political system for the next five years. This congress will also mark the halfway juncture for Xi Jinping's three top positions in the party-state as Secretary General of the CCP, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and President of China.

Xi has assumed a somewhat unexpected role during his first term in power. He is much more visible in domestic and international media than his predecessor ever was. In addition, he chairs more committees and more of the issue-focused 'leading small groups' than has previously been the norm. The distribution of the main work portfolios between the President and Premier also seems to have shifted in the direction of Xi Jinping in that he presides over meetings and events that were traditionally the responsibility of the Premier.

The Chinese Communist Party has operated under some form of collective leadership for at least forty years. In short,



central collective leadership in the CCP means that the Standing Committee of the Politburo makes policy decisions based on consensus and compromise. Issues are open for discussion and debate behind closed doors, but when a majority opinion has been reached and decided upon, the party must stand together as one and present a unified message to the public. However, the recent changes in Xi's public appearance and political roles have led to a debate among observers of Chinese politics about whether collective leadership practices now are in the midst of radical change.

Before we can establish whether collective leadership is declining in importance, we need to define its role in Chinese politics. What are the origins of collective leadership in China and how does this leadership principle affect decision-making? Although Chinese sources emphasise particularly Chinese characteristics with regard to their current practice of collective leadership, its origins as an ideal of political governance can also be traced back to Vladimir Lenin and the Communist Party of The Soviet Union. In the Chinese setting, the starting point of the history of Chinese collective decisions has been positioned in the early years of Mao Zedong. However, during the time of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (1958–1976) the political practice under Mao went counter to the party principles of collective decisions. Official party history describes this as a grave mistake, and that Deng Xiaoping subsequently improved the collective system in order to avoid similar lapses into personal rule in the future. This approach was largely maintained with Jiang Zemin as party leader (1989–2002) to be further developed under Hu Jintao (2002–2012).

THE COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP SYSTEM

Wang Chunxi and Ren Chan, in an article on collective leadership published in China in 2016, divide the political areas affected by this leadership practice into six different categories. In their words, the collective leadership is a system consisting of six

central political 'mechanisms'. It is useful to go through what these six mechanisms consist of in order to gain an understanding of how broad the collective leadership is considered to be in the Communist Party. Achieving consensus on a matter in the Standing Committee of the Politburo is just the pinnacle of a larger set of norms of collective governance. They include:

1. *The collective way of transferring power from one leader to the next.* The current leader no longer has the right or opportunity to pick the next leader. This choice is made based on consensus at the top and approval from the wider party leadership.
2. *The collective set-up in the party organisation.* There is currently a particular way of dividing responsibilities between collective and individual tasks in the CCP organisation.
3. *Collective study sessions for and by the CCP leadership.* As an example, Wang and Ren mention that between 1994 and 2002 there were 12 collective study sessions of issues on law and order, often twice a year.
4. *Collective gathering of information.* The collective leadership principle prescribes regularised background research, inspections and consultations before the party platform is formalised. For example, it takes around one year to draft the most important party documents. These documents are the result of a series of meetings involving deliberation with, and reports from, other levels of the party as well as among central leaders.
5. *Policy decisions.* The top authority in the CCP is the Standing Committee of the Politburo. This is currently a seven-member body, and it needs a consensus or majority among these seven members to reach valid policy decisions.
6. *Internal supervision.* It is the task of the collective to supervise its own members, and the individual is continuously under the watch of the collective leadership.



Practicing these six areas of collective leadership has become more and more institutionalised from the time of Mao's death until Xi Jinping took over as Secretary General of the Communist Party in 2012. However, there seems to have been a bottleneck regarding efficiency in reaching policy consensus in Hu Jintao's nine-member Standing Committee, especially in the latter of his two five-year terms as party leader. Therefore, after the leadership change of 2012, there were some modifications to central leadership dynamics. The Standing Committee was reduced back to seven members. Soon afterwards, the new party leader quickly became a much more visible figure as a representative of the party, and observers started wondering how far the reversal of collectiveness might go. Will we see another Deng or even Mao figure in today's leader Xi? When the Central Committee meeting communiqué in October 2016 referred to Xi with the older title 'core' of the leadership, it seemed that another, and perhaps crucial, chip had been hacked off collective leadership practices. But is this really the case?

THE CONCEPT OF 'CORE LEADER'

What does it mean that Xi Jinping has become the 'leader at the core' or 'core leader' of the CCP? Some local party leaders started referring to Xi Jinping as the core of the party in early 2016, perhaps as an organised test to observe political reactions to reviving this older term. After a few months' break the Central Committee plenum meeting in Beijing used the term again in their meeting communiqué, effectively making it official. Does this mean that Xi will be referred to as 'core' from now on? It might be too early to tell, but it is still in use eight months into 2017, and its current use in central documents is more significant than its initial introduction on local levels of the CCP.

However, the meaning of 'core leader' is different from 'paramount leader'. 'Core' is rather a term emphasising collectiveness over hierarchy in a setting where both are present. The concept of 'core' has in the past

been an integral part of collective leadership theory, not a contradiction to it. The leader at the core is the individual in the collective who has extra responsibilities, rights and representation but who cannot be named top leader without creating a contradiction in terms with the collective leadership concept. In this way 'core' represents a balancing act.

In addition, Xi is not becoming an exception by receiving this title. On the contrary, in search of an exception we could rather point to Hu Jintao. Jiang Zemin before him was also referred to as the core of the party. Why was there no use of 'core' between 2002 and 2012? Some sources say this is because Hu Jintao did not want the title in order to further the development of collective decision-making. Others hint that Hu was a weaker leader and never achieved becoming 'core leader' in spite of trying. Whichever explanation is closer to the truth, the use of 'core' disappeared from official texts for a decade. This means that we are indeed observing a kind of reversal taking place in rhetorical practice surrounding collective leadership in addition to Xi's more visible role. However, this reversal in the status of the 'core' title is towards the situation in 2002 rather than toward the Deng Xiaoping or Mao Zedong eras. We seem to be back at the Jiang-era balancing act in political concepts concerning collective leadership.

This is also evident in the mentioned Central Committee communiqué from late 2016. The rest of this document explains at length that collective leadership is still the basic operating principle of the CCP, and that no individual in the party can counter the collective leadership principle. These points are underlined perhaps even stronger in the latest plenum communiqué than what is normally the case in other recent political documents. In this way it weighs up for the simultaneous renewed use of 'core' in the same document. This reveals an effort to keep the balance intact.

In this way, cautious balancing and minimal expression of change remain the practice of the Chinese Communist Party. This is in



itself an integral part of the continuous consensus-making process while also providing a signal that collective leadership is still in operation. At the upcoming 19th National Party Congress in the autumn of 2017 the CCP will adjust formulations in the party

platform. We need to look to the documents and new personnel changes coming out of this next party congress to find out more about where collective leadership in the CCP is heading with Xi Jinping at the core.



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