

**CHINA'S LEADERSHIP TRANSITION:
CERTAINTIES AND UNCERTAINTIES**

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Executive Summary

1. In China's next leadership transition, which will take place mainly at the forthcoming 18th Party Congress in 2012, it seems highly certain that Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang will take the leading positions. Xi will be appointed General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, and Li the Premier (at the National People's Congress of March 2013). Any change in succession plans would damage the Party's credibility and the regime's stability.
2. The biggest uncertainty is the composition of the next Politburo Standing Committee. This opens the major battlefield of individual and factional competition among Party leaders.
3. All nine incumbent Politburo members under the age of 68 in 2012 are hopefuls for the next Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). Among them, those two-term Politburo members, including Yu Zhengsheng, Zhang Dejiang, and Liu Yunshan, have the advantage of seniority, but not in terms of age.
4. Wang Qishan and Li Yuanchao have competitiveness due to their current positions and job performance. Bo Xilai has become a frontrunner for his unusual performance in governing Chongqing. The other three, Liu Yandong, Zhang Gaoli, and Wang Yang, are also highly competitive.
5. "Dark horses" may come from cadres at the lower rank, including Ling Jihua and Meng Jianzhu. The chances of "six generation" leaders' entry to the 18th Politburo Standing Committee are slim.
6. Possible institutional manipulations will add complexities to the power redistribution process. The lowering of the age bar from 68, which was adopted at the last Party Congress, to 67, 66, or even 65, would greatly alter the senior Politburo members' opportunity of getting into the next PSC, and, therefore, the factional balance within the new leadership.

7. An equally significant institutional manipulation can be conducted concerning membership to the PSC. While it is unlikely that the seats will be reduced, the expansion of PSC membership to eleven would tremendously impact on the composition of the PSC and the operation of the next leadership.
8. It is very likely that the military's presence in the next leadership will remain at the current level with two PLA members in the Politburo. Generals Chang Wanquan, Xu Qiliang, and Wu Shengli would be the most possible candidates based on seniority and ranking.
9. New factors have emerged to pressure Hu Jintao to retire from the Central Military Commission chairmanship in 2012, which should be regarded as another major uncertainty in the leadership transition. Compromises could be reached, however, on the possible ways that Hu could stay on as the CMC Chairman after the 18th Party Congress for a short time of possibly a year.
10. The final decisions concerning these issues would, seemingly, be made collectively by a 21-member group of existing and previous PSC members. Not all of them have equal power in deciding the new leadership; Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the former and current Party Chiefs, are the most powerful within this group.
11. Elections at the Party Congress will, normally, not raise new uncertainties for the leadership transition. Although there will be at least one election conducted with more candidates than posts, or "*cha-e xuanju*" (差额选举), various mechanisms have already been developed to guarantee the election of designated leaders to the Central Committee.