THE MAKING OF THE 18TH PARTY CENTRAL COMMITTEE: CHINA'S SELECTION SYSTEM AND ITS CHALLENGES

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Executive Summary

1. Institutionalisation of political processes is the foundation of enduring political stability. After the Cultural Revolution, the shift towards institutionalisation is a great contribution of Deng Xiaoping to China's political development. However, political institutionalisation under one-party rule is ridden with problems.

2. The making of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party last fall followed an elaborate process of six procedures governing the nomination, evaluation and election of candidates as practiced in local leadership succession for more than a decade.

3. Between mid-2011 and mid-2012 Beijing dispatched around the country 59 inspection teams headed by senior cadres ranked at the provincial-ministerial level with 1,000 or so members to supervise the nomination and evaluation of candidates.

4. Altogether 42,800 local cadres participated in the "democratic nomination" and "democratic assessment" of the candidates. The inspection teams interviewed 27,500 individuals for their views on potential candidates, while 29,000 "public opinion poll" questionnaires were administered in 31 provinces. A total of 532 out of 727 candidates were selected by the Politburo Standing Committee.

5. The election was held among 2,300 or so delegates to the 18th Party Congress under the supervision of the Presidium. The delegates were divided into 38 delegations that voted separately. A competitive "preliminary election" was held on 11 November last year, in which some of the better known individuals such as the former Central Bank governor were eliminated.

6. Based on the voting result, the Presidium (headed by Xi Jinping) adjusted and finalized the candidate list. A non-competitive final vote was held on 14

November. A candidate was considered elected as long as he or she got half of the votes. Alternate members were ranked according to the number of votes won.

7. The seemingly orderly process is however full of loopholes, apparently to allow the top leaders to intervene and influence the outcome when necessary. Examples include the separate votes by delegations, the shady role of the Presidium, and the misalignment between the nominators and the voters.

8. But China has come a long way since Maoist whimsical personnel decision making. The more even power distribution in the political system in the post-paramount leader era inevitably leads to greater reliance on institutions.

9. The regime's need for legitimacy, the diversification of the social composition of party members (as reflected in the diversity of the delegates), and the socialization of all future leaders in the six procedures when they moved up the ladder also bode well for further institutionalization.

10. But powerful forces exist to retard or disrupt the institutionalization process, including the deeply ingrained notion of "democratic centralism", the culture of conformity, and the reliance on the patronage of top leaders for further advancement. The role of the Central Committee is also ill-defined and marginal in the exercise of power at the top.