

CHINA'S COMING 17TH PARTY CONGRESS

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Executive Summary

The 17th Party Congress is set to convene on the 15th of October, 2007. In the last two decades the Party Congress has become institutionalized and the most important political event in every five years.

The Party Congress now is a formal occasion for the Party to pronounce major policy platforms and directions, as well as to reshuffle important government personnel.

Changes to the country's top leadership, including the formal transfer of political power from one top leader to the next, also take place at the Party Congress.

The coming 17th Party Congress will see the consolidation of Hu Jintao's power. At the same time, Hu will lay the ground for transferring power to the next generation of leaders five years down the road.

The Congress will affirm Hu's policy lines, the "Scientific Development" and "Harmony Society" concepts, so that in the next few years Hu can further build up his policy legacies.

Another major function of the Congress is to pick Hu's potential successors. The 52-year-old Party Secretary of Liaoning Li Keqiang (李克强) has long been seen as Hu's favorite choice. Li will very likely be advanced to the Politburo Standing Committee at this Congress.

Rumors also point to Xi Jinping (习近平), the 54-year-old Party Secretary of Shanghai, as a formidable competitor for the heir-apparent position. At the moment, it seems difficult to predict whether Xi or Li will be the chosen one.

This may indicate that succession politics in China has become much more contentious; unlike Deng and Mao, no China leader now has the authority to fix his choice of successors at will. The Party's internal politics may become more volatile from now on.

It is expected that those 68 or older in the current Politburo Standing Committee (four to five of them) will retire and be replaced by new in-takes. The critical issue is whether the powerful Zeng Qinghong (68 years old) would retire as this will significantly affect the eventual power structure at the top. Recent developments seem to suggest he would.

It is likely the Congress will experiment with some piecemeal reforms toward so-called intra-party democracy, such as the *cha'e* (差额) election when electing the Central Committee and the Politburo.

This Congress will thus amount to a mid-term adjustment presided over by Hu Jintao, not much unlike a US President wrapping up his first term and starting the second.

Looking beyond the Congress, the Party's top governing agenda is to ensure the 2008 Beijing Olympics goes smoothly and successfully. It also needs to contain Chen Shuibian's aggressive moves toward Taiwan independence.

Managing the overheating economy is an imminent task, while dealing with China's various social problems (income inequality and environmental degradations, for example) will remain a long-term task for the Party.