

The secret meeting to decide China's leaders for the next decade



Leo Lewis

Published at 12:01AM, October 20 2012

Late on a chilly afternoon in mid-November, a small group of Chinese Communist Party mandarins — probably all men, probably all wearing red ties and almost certainly led by Xi Jinping — will file on to a red carpet in Beijing's Great Hall of the People.

They will be the leaders who will govern China for the next decade. But such is the secrecy of the party that, with less than a month to go, no one outside the top echelons knows how many will be in the group, or who they will be. The only certainty is that its composition will affect not only China, but the entire world.

The line-up to be unveiled at next month's 18th National Congress of the Communist Party is the Politburo Standing Committee — China's all-powerful leadership collective.

The tiny cabal will run the world's most populous country, its most ravenous consumer of energy, its second-biggest economy and its most rapidly expanding military.

The world may be baffled by the mystery surrounding the high-walled leadership compound of Zhongnanhai in central Beijing, but it can no longer afford not to care. Over the next

decade, strategic and political decisions from Washington to Windhoek will increasingly be taken in light of what China does. Economists already look to China for a sense of where markets are heading. Planning over resources such as oil, water and raw materials already takes future Chinese demand into account.

Set to start on November 8, the congress is a purely party event expected to last about a week. Being internal — not government — business, almost nothing of what goes on inside the Great Hall will be communicated to the outside world.

Of the little that is known, it is virtually certain that Mr Xi, the current Vice-President, and Vice-Premier Li Keqiang will emerge on the dais as numbers one and two in the Standing Committee rankings and thus take over the roles of President and Premier when the rubber-stamp parliament meets in March.

Will Mr Xi emerge with a clear ideology or road map for reform? Almost certainly not, said Zheng Yongnian, an expert on Chinese politics at the University of Singapore.

“We should not expect anything grand. Mr Xi and whoever else makes it to the Standing Committee have got there by carefully not spelling out their ideas. The standing committee that will emerge next month is the next generation of leaders in an evolution that has increasingly favoured pragmatism over ideology for years.”

Hu Xingdou, a political economist at the Beijing University of Technology, agrees that expectations of radical reforms by the new Standing Committee should be tempered.

“But I think a vital moment has been reached. Compared with ten years ago, resentment of the wealth gap is at breaking point, the economy is weaker, political divisions are more visible. But we are also getting a leadership drawn from a stratum that is used to power. The coming party congress will be remembered as a turning point,” Mr Hu said.

The congress will involve 2,270 delegates from across the country for the meetings and elections of a new Central Committee and Politburo. But even now, one delegate told *The Times*, the delegates have no agenda. One said: “I have been told that the hotel I am staying in has good organic yoghurt. Other than that, nothing.”

Despite the traditional opacity, say political analysts, it is impossible to overstate the importance of this Congress.

Beijing’s policy over the past two years — and arguably for longer — has been aimed at ensuring that this single event runs smoothly against a background of national stability.

The suppression of free debate on the internet, the detention of rights lawyers and dissidents such as the artist Ai Weiwei, a panic over rumours of a non-existent “Jasmine Revolution” have all been signals of the party’s determination to prevent any disturbance ruffling its crucial five-yearly meeting.

For a regime striving to maintain social stability, this is an important opportunity to show that, even with a slowing economy, the top leadership stands solid, able to hand over power to a new generation without the infighting that marred transfers of power in earlier years of Communist rule.

The party, battered by the scandal surrounding the disgraced politician Bo Xilai and anxious to calm public fury at rising corruption, wants to present the image of a leadership responsive to its people’s pain.

It also wants to be seen as ready to embrace what one prominent government think-tank described as “the last chance for reform”.

The challenges facing the party are compounded in an era of Twitter-style microblogs that question its decisions in real time — coupled with splits within the party that have become visible through the scandal surrounding Mr Bo.

In recent months officials have been scouring the world for examples of how other governments are responding to similar changes. British academics recently received a delegation whose sole purpose, said one, “was to find out how we dealt with the London riots and to ask how the Big Society works in an era of big information”.

As the congress has neared, speculation over who might reach the Standing Committee has lurched between several theories. One is that it will be reduced from nine members to seven — a streamlining exercise that might create a more agile decision-making body as the need for reform becomes more urgent.

Various names of candidates have swirled in recent months, their fortunes seen to depend on the strength of the factions or ideas they may represent.

Some cast this as a tussle between reformers and hardliners. Others as a struggle between President Hu and his predecessor, Jiang Zemin, to push forward the champions of their particular power bases. Others see it as a power-play between the “princeling” sons of former party elders and those who have risen independently.

The personalities may be less important than the collective. “Despite all the challenges that lie before it, the new Standing Committee, will not be much different from the one it is replacing: the one that wasted a ten-year chance to reform,” said Deng Yuwen, an editor at the *Study Times* newspaper that is the mouthpiece of the powerful Central Party School. “The sole concern of the new line-up will be to give people a sense of hope while itself staying in power.”

Power players

The 18th Party Congress will see a generational change in the Politburo, the 25-member group at the top of the Communist Party from which the even more powerful Standing Committee is drawn.

Of the current 25 politburo members, 14 will retire, of whom seven are members of the Standing Committee. Amid a frenzy of speculation, these are the five most likely to take their places:

Xi Jinping, 59

Princeling? Yes

Vice-President since 2008 and vice-chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission since 2010. He has strong connections with the People’s Liberation Army and his father was a famous revolutionary and political leader. His daughter attends Harvard University and his wife is one of China’s most famous folk singers.

Likelihood of making the Standing Committee: 99.99%

Li Keqiang, 57

Princeling? No

He is a vice-premier who rose through the Communist Youth League — like his patron and current President, Hu Jintao. The league still represents his power base. He holds a PhD in economics. Once widely regarded as a prime candidate to succeed Mr Hu, he emerged in second place behind Mr Xi at the last party congress.

Likelihood of making the Standing Committee: 99.99%

Wang Qishan, 64**Princeling? Yes**

He is a vice-premier with oversight of the economy and the son-in-law of Yao Yilin, a former vice-premier. He was governor of one of the “big four” state-owned banks in the 1990s, and was mayor of Beijing when the SARS virus struck in 2003. Considered the senior politician most likely to handle any financial or currency reform agreed by the Standing Committee.

Likelihood of making the Standing Committee: 90%

Zhang Dejiang, 66**Princeling? No**

He is Party Secretary of the megacity of Chongqing. After graduating from Yanbian University in the northeast, he crossed the border to take an economics degree in North Korea. He has been in charge of telecoms, energy and transport industries — areas of state-owned industry that may be the first targets of reform. After the downfall of Bo Xilai as party chief in Chongqing, Mr Zhang was drafted in as a caretaker boss.

Likelihood of making the Standing Committee: 90%

Li Yuanchao, 62**Princeling? Yes**

He is the powerful head of the Party’s Central Organisation Department. His father was deputy mayor of Shanghai until he was purged in the Cultural Revolution. Mr Li has waged a war on polluting companies to establish his green credentials.

Likelihood of making Standing Committee: 60%

And the long shot . . .

Liu Yandong, 67**Princeling? Yes**

She is the only woman on the Politburo and a State Councillor. She is the daughter of Liu Ruilong, one of the founders of the Red Army. She is seen as the first woman in Chinese history with even a shot of making it on to the Standing Committee.

Likelihood of making the Standing Committee: 10%