Cadre Calculus
Making Sense of China’s 19th Party Congress and Beyond
By Tristan Kenderdine

On October 18, China will open its 19th Party Congress, an institutionalized gathering every five years in which the Chinese Communist Party reveals personnel changes in top leadership positions that are closely watched for signs of China’s future policy direction. President Xi Jinping has been maneuvering for months to ensure an outcome that leaves him even stronger as he enters his second five-year term. Tristan Kenderdine explores the many scenarios that could play out.

CHINA IS BIG but not so complex. The political-administrative structure only becomes complicated because of the magnitude of the politics involved. Wishful Western analyses over the past two decades have argued that industrial development and global economic integration would somehow transform China into a democratic state. This rosy view leaves out the persistence of institutional forms in China. It also omits two important ideological undercurrents of Chinese political thought that exist alongside, underneath and around the dominant ideology of Confucianism and its current Communist manifestation: Daoism and Numerology.

China’s collective leadership machine will crank forward regardless of external pressures. Changing the career paths already set in motion by the cadre system of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is too huge a shift to entertain. Slight variations around the edges, albeit constrained by predetermined institutional paths, are more likely. As such, most of the personnel movements that will take place at the 19th CCP Congress — which starts on October 18 — will mostly be in-system horse trading, with perhaps a few institutional changes that don’t rock the boat too much.

ANALYZING A PRE-INDUSTRIAL FORM
China’s Grand Unity system is a pre-industrial form of national governance overlaid with Russian political and economic institutions of Russian origin. But we can use the multi-level governance theory of the European Union to analyze China’s Grand Unity as if it were a federated system, a customs and monetary union and a distributed power-sharing arrangement. This allows us insights into an otherwise mundane party political hierarchy.

The administrative branch of government is the key to understanding executive branch party politics in China. Political philosophy in the social contract tradition gives us the analytical tools to split the state into four institutions: the executive, administrative, legislative and judicial branches. While often overlooked by many political analyses of state power in general, it is particularly important to treat the administrative branch of government seriously in China.

A table of the CCP’s institutional leadership matrix — far too big to reproduce here, but viewable at http://trsk.com/map/cadrecalculus/ — demonstrates the many moving parts involved in any leadership change within a cadre-driven system. While we can look at the Politburo Standing Committee as the principal policy-setting mechanism, in reality the monumental power of the executive branch in China far outweighs both the legislative and judicial power structures. The administrative power structure, though, holds the balance of power in the CCP.

Xi Jinping’s problems now are how to: return the Politburo Standing Committee to a majority for him; create the institutional path forward for his successor; put the young liberal faction of Hu Chunhua, Sun Zhengcai, and Li Keqiang in a box; and — as always, above all else — ensure that he can retire without too much fear of retribution. In the October Congress, Xi will lose State Council workhorse Zhang Gaoli, on whom so much of the practical reform agenda of Xi’s first term fell. And playing by the “67 up, 68 down” rule — which requires officials to retire once they reach 68 years old — he would lose his “doer,” Wang Qishan, director of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the country’s anti-corruption watchdog, and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee. However, it does clear out a rumored toxic 5-2 split on the standing committee, the top of the collective leadership pyramid.

Speculation that there will be a reduction from seven to five members on the standing committee, though, belittles how big a move cutting the committee from nine to seven already was. Faced with a leadership challenge from Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang, the earlier cut was an in-system attempt to restrict future power structures emerging from the same nexus of the Politics and Legal Commission. But that was to stem the power whence a palace coup might come, and it returned the standing committee number to a conventional, institutionalized one. Despite rumblings from party “splittists,” there is no existing threat to Xi that justifies cutting the size of the standing committee to five. And to make that cut would mean removing the weakest institutional positions, which are exactly the positions Xi can use to bolster support. The vice chair of the Party Central Committee and the Central Secretariat Secretary would be the logical slots to remove — but they are party avenues to empower loyalty, such as that of Wang Huning, who is likely to join the standing committee at the Party Congress.

STANDING COMMITTEE IMPORTANCE
Dropping the standing committee completely is out of the question without risking institutional collapse. Already running a Russian system of governance, without the pervasive committee system, China has no governance fallback short of imperial institutions.

So, let us say that the “67 up, 68 down” rule applies to all party officials except for Wang Qishan in 2017. It is possible that keeping Wang on the standing committee will mean the rule disappears entirely, although this is unlikely given the complexity of the system and no other clear rule for leading cadres to step aside. This, though,
would give Xi’s successor, and the group surrounding him, a precedent for breaking the 67 up, 68 down rule to further their political calculus in the 20th and 21st Party Congresses.

The age rule helps outside observers thin out potential future leaders. Most party cadres in the executive or administrative branch will retire before they can reach Politburo level. But looking at the ages of those who have already achieved the cadre rank of zhengbu (正部), or minister, is indicative of immediate future leadership potential. This is the current worry of the Xi administration, given the incredibly young Hu and Sun, and the established jeunesse of Li Keqiang.

The last piece of the cadre calculus is the local-government party secretaries and mayors. These are the politicians waiting for their time in the Politburo, hundreds coming through the ranks at the city level, and around 100 with a cadre rank of zhengbu. A minister of the State Council has the same cadre rank as a Party secretary of a province, a mayor of a provincial-level city, or the leader of a state-owned enterprise.

19TH CONGRESS HORSE TRADING IN ORDER TO SECURE THE 20TH

The Zhou and Lou show of market liberalization was well and truly sidelined through 2016, along with Li Keqiang and the rest of the administrative power apparatus. Many CCP watchers tend to ignore the State Council positions, but the two in the standing committee are crucial. The elevation of Wang Yang as first vice-premier to replace Zhang Gaoli is a near certainty.

Xi’s agreement with Hu Jintao to allow Hu Chunhua to grow into a future leader is in doubt, though, as Xi sidelines future opposition. Wang Huning is the key figure, particularly as he moves to safeguard Xi’s legacy in the 20th Politburo Standing Committee. Wang Huning is not only a loyal “red factionite,” but is also a man-to-man marker on Hu Chunhua.

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There are also a host of rising governors, party secretaries and ministers who will vie for Politburo positions, both from the so-called Zhijiang New Army and the market-liberal camp. The trick is to look for personnel who are eligible to serve in the Politburo in 2017 and the standing committee in 2022 and is a serious contender for the chairmanship. Zhao Kezhi was in Guizhou before him, and is a good bet to move up from Hebei to one of the provinces with a Politburo seat, probably Beijing. Guiyang Party secretary Chen Gang is also likely to climb to Politburo level by the 20th Congress. Dalian Party Secretary Li Xi has also been a contender for the 19th Congress Politburo, especially considering the dramatic decline of Party politics in rival Tianshin and the need to shore up Party support in the key province where the fallen Bo Xilai in the country, but engaging in China-bashing leadership currently studying abroad and moving into capitalist leadership positions reacts.

The fate of the Hu-Sun 2022 ticket and its followers may be determined by the throes of international capitalism, if the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative falls flat and there is a resurgence of market-liberal order. However, with the United States and the European Union likely to remain preoccupied with domestic politics during the 19th Congress, the 20th Congress may throw up some surprises that few would have predicted even in 2013, when the talk was of global economic integration.

The world engages the cadre system
There is much cognitive dissonance among intellectuals and government officials who spend time in the graces of Beijing. There is a tendency to suspend commitments to liberal democracy, only for the counter-movement to come back even stronger once they have left China — think of David Shambaugh’s dire predictions of regime collapse in The Wall Street Journal. The People’s Republic of China is not going anywhere except forward. For the West, wishful thinking about a transformation to liberal local government must take a backseat. But likewise, there is no honor in toadying up to power in Beijing when one is in the country, but engaging in China-bashing when one is outside. A mature engagement with a super power with differing political, philosophical, governance, legal, and moral systems from the dominant global ideology begins with solving institutional problems in-system, without challenging the ingrained religious-ideologies of Confucianism and Daoism.

Disruptions. Wang Qishan is out, Li Keqiang is in, Hu Chunhua is in, and Wang Huning is there to keep order, as a placeholder to shepherd Chen Min’er as successor. It is a very conciliatory scenario, with Xi on the surface giving up almost everything and allowing a Hu-loyal Politburo Standing Committee to form around him. It would restore the world’s faith in China’s economic liberalization agenda, but will probably only occur if Xi has barred this for protection of his successor in the 20th Congress.

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For the 20th Congress (see Table 2), we see the rise of Chen Min’er, Liu Cigu and Li Xi under the tutelage of Wang Yang running the State Council. The vanguard of 6th Generation leadership is currently either in Guizhou and Zhejiang, or have recently served in one of those places. Chen Min’er, the Guizhou party secretary, will likely rise to the Politburo in 2017 and the standing committee in 2022 and is a serious contender for the chairmanship. Zhao Kezhi was in Guizhou before him, and is a good bet to move up from Hebei to one of the provinces with a Politburo seat, probably Beijing. Guiyang Party secretary Chen Gang is also likely to climb to Politburo level by the 20th Congress. Dalian Party Secretary Li Xi is also a contender for the 19th Congress Politburo, especially considering the dramatic decline of Party politics in rival Tianshin and the need to shore up Party support in the key province where the fallen Bo Xilai is still immensely popular.

The fate of the Hu-Sun 2022 ticket and its followers may be determined by the throes of international capitalism, if the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative falls flat and there is a resurgence of market-liberal order. The alternative to a strengthening of the core to usher Xi into the safety of retirement in 2022 is the resurgence of a market-liberal camp, a counter-movement to rekindle the Hu Jin and Shanghai-led global market order. However, with the United States and the European Union likely to remain preoccupied with domestic politics during the 19th Congress, the 20th Congress may throw up some surprises that few would have predicted even in 2013, when the talk was of global economic integration.

Expecting a scenario where a lifetime of sacrifice to public service is suddenly discounted is a continuity break that is more anathema to China’s in-system officialdom than a change in how local governments — and therefore central government institutions — are managed. The short-term policy shifts implied by the personnel changes in October 2017 will grab the headlines. But we should look for the finer touches if we wish to imagine what the sixth generation of Chinese leadership will look like when it takes the reins of power in 2022, and — more importantly — how the nascent seventh generation leadership currently studying abroad and moving into capitalist leadership positions reacts.

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Note: Between authorship and publication Sun Zhengcai was removed from all party positions pending discipline inspection.