

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Holds Its Annual Strategic Private Meeting: “Shaping the Future of China”. Deep-seated Political Divisions within Chinese Leadership?

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Beidaihe, a coastal resort some 280 km north of Beijing, does not see the country’s leading politicians taking the plunge into the blue, to escape the sultry heat, but it does see them testing the political waters for two weeks from the beginning of August. The jostling for position and power brokers doing deals may be reminiscent of political conclaves the world over but this is in a league of its own. One showpiece event will focus their minds this year.

In November central Beijing will cordon off its roads, and close its subway stations as the quinquennial 20th National Congress of the Communist Party takes place. President Xi Jinping wants to take this opportunity to be chosen for an unprecedented third term as party secretary and get his allies into top positions. Xi’s hope was that the political atmosphere could be summed up, ahead of the congress, as steady as she goes. That hope has vanished, evaporated like mist in the glare of an unforgiving sun.

Nationwide lockdowns have left more than 200 million under de facto house arrest. China is tackling challenges unlike any it has seen since the party came to power in 1949. College graduates face difficult times getting employment. Urban areas have seen protests at both Covid policies and corruption in banks that have seen deposits wiped out. Property developers are going bust and millions of people have lost their down payments.

Growth, according to the World Bank, will slow to about 4 per cent in 2022 far lower than projected in December. Nothing concentrates party minds as much as lack of growth. A growing economy is a major part of its bargain with the public that authorizes the denial of full political rights in exchange for prosperity.

But there are signs of disquiet. In recent months Premier Li Keqiang has pulled off an almost miraculous recovery for a rival who was meant to have been sidelined and was due to retire to obscurity. Xi and Li are bitter rivals. Li has issued chilling warnings over stalling economic growth.

His words are getting traction. The People's Daily, the official party newspaper, ran a prominent 9,000-word speech by Li in May. Tongues may be wagging but it does not mean Xi will be toppled. But neither is the president as secure as he might have expected to be at the beginning of the year.

While most commentators will focus on the party congress in November, it is at the annual August seaside get-together of party elders and top officials that policies are fleshed out and promotions and demotions approved. The meeting is never announced and there are no press releases or daily updates. Party leaders arrive in their Beidaihe compound under tight security and never mingle with the tourists. If they are short of sunblock it is provided for them.

It seems almost contradictory but in a country without democracy, public opinion is listened to and taken on board. The party is in touch and Beidaihe is where it acts at its most efficient and brutal. It is a place of plain speaking. Arguments break out, positions are challenged. Consequently, it is the most important political meeting in China. Decisions taken here will never be announced but will play out over the following years.

On the international front, China is isolated. Its aggressive posturing, often with blood-curdling language that Xi encourages his diplomats to use, has also contributed to the alienation between China and the West. The international community is nervous about the militarization of the South China Sea as it becomes a Chinese lake. Xi openly allying himself to Vladimir Putin is also causing Europeans to increasingly distance themselves from Beijing. Taiwan and the threat of an invasion is eroding China's reputation.

Although one can never be sure what happens behind Beidaihe's closed doors it would seem a safe bet that Xi is trying to bolster his support. Ten years ago when he assumed office people thought he would be stepping down in 2022. His decision to continue will have consequences as will the meeting at a popular seaside resort north of Beijing. What those consequences will be we do not know. But they will be felt globally.

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