

## The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) How to explain its longevity?

### SUMMARY

With a membership of 86.7 million in 2013 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the largest political party worldwide, representing only slightly more than six per cent of the Chinese population. The CCP is the second-longest lone-ruling communist party, in one of the world's five remaining party-states. It heads assertively towards its 100th anniversary in 2021, since contrary to numerous past forecasts of the CCP's demise, no signs of regime change in China loom on the horizon.

The CCP's strong resilience against internal and external threats to its survival appears to result from a combination of its excellent capability to adapt flexibly to changing realities, and its iron grip on power which relies on a systematic heavy-handed approach to political opposition and peaceful dissent that could challenge its monopolistic one-party rule. Since its inception, the CCP has witnessed transformations of varying degrees of its ideology, organisational structure, governance methods, leadership style and leadership succession practice, as well as membership size and composition, which have allowed it to safeguard its legitimacy and thus its longevity.

Prospects are extremely bleak for the democratisation of the party-state triggered from *outside* the CCP by an opposition party able to threaten the CCP's control as the sole political party with 'genuine influence' in Chinese politics. Based on the CCP's self-established status as a 'vanguard party', i.e. a group of communist leaders determining what is in the best interest of the Chinese people, the CCP leadership adheres strictly to the conviction that the party monitors itself, and therefore staunchly dismisses the idea of outside scrutiny. Gradual democratisation *inside* the party is more likely in a long-term perspective.



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- The evolution of CCP ideology
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## Background

In 2011, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or Communist Party of China (CPC) celebrated its 90th anniversary, making it the second-longest lone-ruling communist party worldwide after the [Korean Workers' Party of North Korea](#).<sup>1</sup> With a membership of [86.7 million](#), as of [2013](#), it is the world's largest political party. However, gauged in terms of its representativeness of the whole Chinese population, totalling 1.36 billion people, this figure is much less impressive ([6.37](#) party members per 100 citizens).

In the 1980s, about two dozen countries across the globe, with a combined population of over one third of the world's population, were governed by communist parties. Following the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the communist regimes in central and eastern Europe, a mere five 'party-states' continue to be ruled by a communist party, which given the absence of an opposition has not emerged from competitive multi-party elections.<sup>2</sup> These party-states are: the People's Republic of China (PRC), Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam.

The CCP's resilience against internal and external threats to its survival appears to result from a combination of its capability to adapt its ideology, institutional framework and support base to changing realities,<sup>3</sup> and an iron grip on power relying on a systematic [heavy-handed approach](#) to any form of political opposition and peaceful dissent which manifests itself outside the CCP, while allowing some degree of intra-party 'democracy'.

## The evolution of CCP ideology

When the CCP was founded in 1921, by a small group of [intellectuals](#) such as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, spearheading its anti-feudal and anti-imperialistic revolutionary movement, it was strongly inspired by the Russian revolution of 1917. It rapidly became a mass movement, drawing more on peasants and intellectuals than industrial workers. Until the Sino-Soviet split at the end of the 1950s, the Soviet Union's communist regime served as a model for the CCP and also provided key material and technical support. While the CCP joined forces with the nationalist party [Kuomintang](#) led by [Chiang Kai-shek](#) to free China from foreign influence, to end a century of humiliation and to unite the country, a power struggle between them resulted in a [civil war](#). By 1949, the CCP had driven the Kuomintang from mainland China to Taiwan, thus leading to the establishment of the PRC under the sole leadership of the CCP.

The CCP's [ideological foundation](#) drew primarily on principles of **Marxism-Leninism** to which successive generations of Chinese Communist Party leaders, notably Mao Zedong (1893–1976), Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), Jiang Zemin (1926–) and Hu Jintao (1942–), have contributed their ideological thoughts, thus adapting 'imported' European ideology to changing Chinese historical, social, economic or political circumstances. These contributions have gradually been integrated both in the PRC's [Constitution](#) and in the CCP's [Constitution](#).

### The CCP's ideological framework

Marxism-Leninism  
Mao Zedong Thought  
Deng Xiaoping Theory  
Jiang Zemin's Three Represents  
Hu Jintao's Scientific Outlook on Development and Harmonious Society

## Mao Zedong Thought

[Mao Zedong](#) proceeded with the first adaptation ('sinification') of Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese context prior to ruling the PRC from 1949 to 1976 as CCP Chairman. Mao's success in guerrilla warfare and the civil war, in uniting the country and in restoring the economy in the years immediately after 1949 were the bases of a lifelong **personality**

**cult** and his almost undisputed CCP leadership. His charisma and capability to mobilise the masses for his ideologically driven campaigns in line with his '[mass line approach](#)' to leadership, stressing the need to be in close touch with the people, enabled him to pursue his radical revolutionary ideas even against internal CCP opposition.

Mao Zedong's Thought combines the '[universal truth](#)' of Marxism-Leninism with the 'concrete practice' of the Chinese revolution. The 'universal truth' Maoism took over from Marxism is the concept of the **class struggle** as a key to understanding the development of human history, the final aim of an egalitarian communist society after a transitional period of socialism, and the belief in the unavoidable collapse of capitalism and the victory of socialism and communism as a result of the proletarian revolution. From Leninism it borrowed the 'theory of the building of a **vanguard proletarian party**', to lead the revolution and the central planning of the economy through five-year plans.

One distinguishing component of Mao Zedong Thought was the key role Mao ascribed to peasants as a leading force in advancing China's revolution both before and after the acquisition of power (at that time the large majority of the Chinese population lived in rural areas), while Marx attributed the revolutionary potential to urban industrial workers.<sup>4</sup> Mao's reliance on the peasantry resulting from the rural support he obtained in the pre-1949 period was vital for two of his major political campaigns with devastating human, social and economic consequences: the [Great Leap Forward](#) (1958-60) and the [Cultural Revolution](#) (1966-76).

Moreover, Mao had a more radical understanding of the class struggle which for him continued in a socialist society and within the Communist party, even after the abolition of private property and the ousting of the exploiting classes. Linked to this is Mao's pessimistic view not only on non-antagonistic but also on antagonistic contradictions among the people, which would persist even in a socialist society as a threat to the revolution. This led him to believe in the need for a '**permanent revolution**'. The result of this thinking was a continuous struggle to eliminate bourgeois or 'rightist' elements in campaigns, such as the 1957 [Anti-Rightist campaign](#).

At the sixth Plenum of the 11th National Party Congress Central Committee in 1981, the CCP issued a '[Resolution](#) on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China' dealing with Mao's controversial legacy. It provided a re-evaluation of Mao's accomplishments and mistakes, with the CCP separating itself from Mao's most radical ideas and considerably redefining its ideology. This however did not, by far, amount to a 'de-Maofication' campaign comparable to the '[de-Stalinisation](#)' undertaken by Nikita Khrushchev in the former Soviet Union.

The resolution states that Mao's ideology remains 'the valuable spiritual asset of our party' and that 'it will be our guide to action for a long time to come.' It highlights three aspects of Mao Zedong Thought, which became crystallised as the party's 'collective wisdom' and which remain most relevant for legitimising CCP rule in China: Mao's pragmatic dictum '[seek truth from facts](#)', the '**mass line approach**' as a guiding principle of CCP work to avoid isolation from the people and '**independence and self-reliance**'. The resolution clearly seeks to distance the Party from the Anti-Rightist campaign, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and warns against reading Mao's works as 'unalterable truth which must be mechanically applied everywhere.'

### Deng Xiaoping Theory

The transition of power from Mao, of the first generation of CCP leaders, to [Deng Xiaoping](#), the second generation, completed in 1978, marked a decisive turning point in CCP ideological evolution, as well as in China's economic development, as the country moved from a revolutionary period to a reform stage. Following the economic disaster of the Mao era, a new [economic development path](#) towards 'building socialism with Chinese characteristics' had to be defined and the CCP's ideology reshaped accordingly. Deng Xiaoping Theory thus is a combination of both aspects.

Deng Xiaoping, who engineered Chinese politics beyond his formal withdrawal in 1989 until his death in 1997, became not only the architect of China's economic reforms and the opening up of the Chinese economy to the world. He also laid down the fundamentals of CCP ideology, underpinning his theory of '[building socialism with Chinese characteristics](#)'. He faced a daunting twofold task: to promote the country's socialist modernisation by launching the [Four Modernisations](#), of agriculture, industry, science and technology and national defence, conceived by former Premier [Zhou Enlai](#), while preserving the CCP's ideological unity and its firm grip on power.<sup>5</sup>

The economic reforms were embedded in the CCP's post-Mao ideological framework through the [Four Cardinal Principles](#) – the ideological guidelines for economic reform – of 1979 which are now enshrined in the CCP and PRC Constitutions. They were considered in former President Hu Jintao's [report](#) to the CCP 17th National Congress in 2007 as the 'very foundation for building our country and the political cornerstone for the survival and development of the Party and the nation'.

#### The Four Cardinal Principles

1. The principle of upholding the socialist path,
2. The principle of upholding the people's democratic dictatorship,
3. The principle of upholding the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC),
4. The principle of upholding Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism.

The Four Cardinal Principles were a clear sign of strict adherence to CCP communist ideology and an effort to preserve the party's ideological stability and legitimacy. They marked the limits within which the economic reforms had to be pursued. Deng's pragmatism ('[It doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, so long as it catches mice](#)') allowed for the integration in the economy of market elements that were considered ideology-neutral and merely intended to fuel economic growth.<sup>6</sup>

The principles moreover set an end to claims for [political reforms](#) expressed *outside* the CCP by the [Democracy Wall movement](#) of the late 1970s, which Deng initially used in his own political struggle against inner-party opponents.<sup>7</sup> China's big economic reformer was a [political hardliner](#), willing to defend CCP core ideology with military means, as evidenced by his involvement in the [suppression](#) of the student protests at Tiananmen Square by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1989, under martial law.

China thus entered development characterised by a widening gap between a rapid economic transition and stalled political reforms.<sup>8</sup> Although political reforms were intensively debated within the CCP in the 1980s, they did not go beyond de-emphasising Mao's revolutionary ideology, as reflected in [terminological changes](#) of the 1982 revision of the CCP Constitution,<sup>9</sup> institutionalising party positions and procedures and revising CCP recruitment practices. This resulted in improved educational backgrounds among party members and a surge in technocrats among the third and fourth leadership generation.

### Jiang Zemin's Three Represents

The Three Represents of former President [Jiang Zemin](#) (1993-2003) were proclaimed in 2000, and included in the CCP's and PRC's Constitution. However, unlike Mao's and Deng's ideological contributions, they were incorporated into the ideological canon without explicit reference to their author. The doctrine amounts to a major redefinition of the party's understanding of whom and what it represents, [acknowledging](#) the growing significance of the non-state sector in the Chinese economy in the wake of the economic reforms since the 1970s.

**Under Jiang Zemin's 'Three Represents', the CCP should always [represent](#):**

1. The development trend of China's *advanced* productive forces,
2. The orientation of China's advanced culture,
3. The fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.

The **Three Represents** contain two major innovative elements, aimed at making the party more inclusive. The first concerns the opening up of CCP membership to '*advanced* productive forces', to widen the party's support basis. In the 1990s, this meant people working in the private sector, notably in urban areas on the east coast, i.e. [capitalists](#), officially referred to as the '**new social strata**'.<sup>10</sup> The second change relates to the group of people whose 'fundamental interests' the CCP intends to represent. This group was extended from the 'working class' to 'the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people'. This shift has been [interpreted](#) as implying a change in CCP self-perception as a revolutionary party, towards that of a governing party.

Considering Deng's belief that the CCP represents the people and not capitalists, and that a socialist market economy essentially differs from a capitalist market economy in the dominant role of the CCP aimed at avoiding the influence of capitalists, the entry of this social group shows the great flexibility and dynamics of CCP ideology. It suggests that the party at that point gave preference to maintaining stability and its firm grip on power, rather than preserving ideological coherence.

Jiang's ideological contribution also seems to reflect the party's conviction that its post-Mao legitimacy, and thus survival, is inextricably linked to the delivery of economic goods to the people. From this perspective it was most reasonable to co-opt the social group most capable of securing a dynamic economic development, the growing (bourgeois) middle class, which was the CCP's biggest enemy during the Mao era. Initially, however, the Three Represents met with stiff [opposition](#) from conservative party leaders, who took the view that openly embracing private business practices was a betrayal of Marxist values.

### Hu Jintao's Scientific Outlook on Development and the Harmonious Socialist Society

The [Scientific Outlook on Development](#) (also known as 'scientific development concept' or 'scientific development perspective') is the contribution of former President [Hu Jintao](#) (2003-13) to CCP ideological discourse. It depicts his vision of China's future socioeconomic development and is intimately linked to the objective of building a [Harmonious Socialist Society](#). The concept, which was incorporated into China's 11th five-year plan (2006-10), and the CCP and PRC [Constitution](#), '**puts people first and calls for [a] comprehensive, balanced and sustainable development.**' (...) 'It fully embodies the Marxist worldview on and methodology for development and represents the latest achievement in adapting Marxism to China's conditions.'

The concept represents a substantial departure from the development paradigm of the previous economic pathway, which emphasised export and foreign investment-led double-digit GDP growth rates, while neglecting social development, and had led to large social disparities and potential sources of social unrest. It contains implicit criticism of Jiang's and Deng's focus on economic growth at any cost, favouring certain sectors or regions (coastal provinces and cities), and thus allowing unequal economic evolution based on Deng's dictum of '[letting some people get rich first](#)'.

The concept sets out the urgent need to address the socioeconomic implications of the economic strategy pursued for three decades. While Hu Jintao identified 'five pairs of coordination' (see box), his initial approach has evolved into an [umbrella concept](#) for a much wider range of policies to tackle the social problems resulting from China's previous market-focused economic reforms.

#### [Five pairs of coordination](#)

Rural versus urban, coastal versus central and western, economic versus social, human versus nature, and domestic development versus openness to the world.

Hu Jintao advocated redirecting China's economic and social policies, including the redistribution of wealth and better environmental management and sustainable development, as vital requirements for the creation of a Harmonious Socialist Society in China. This implies that there will be increasing disharmony if the economic growth path is not rebalanced. Protests by displaced workers and farmers in recent years, so-called '[mass incidents](#)', which have increased social and political instability, seem to confirm this view.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Xi Jinping Thought or Theory so far?**

Current [President Xi's](#) final contribution to the CCP's ideological canon is still unknown and his [China Dream](#) rhetoric is more about nationalism and China's global status ('to achieve the great [rejuvenation](#) of the Chinese nation ... in modern times'). His term of office has so far been marked by a strong ambition to strengthen the CCP's role in Chinese society, by reiterating the roots of party doctrine, and by eliminating any (foreign/Western) thoughts and influence which might detract from it.

Two major campaigns have been launched to this end: an intra-party **anti-corruption campaign** and an **ideological guidance campaign**, primarily [targeting](#) students and academic staff, with a view to fighting the corrosion of socialist values. Linked to both campaigns is the 2014 toughening of CCP [recruitment criteria](#), in an effort to shift from a quantitative to a qualitative strategy. It aims at reaching out to more principled members ('true believers'), and thus at actually downsizing party membership. Growing party membership is [no longer](#) perceived as a vital element of CCP legitimacy, but rather as a loss in terms of 'purity, vitality and reputation', and a risk for losing touch with the people, jeopardising the 'mass line approach'.

The [campaign](#) against pervasive corruption has been aimed at strengthening the party's ideology and reversing the negative consequences of the inroads capitalist norms have made during the past three decades of market economy reforms. It has targeted numerous high-ranking party members such as former Chongqing Party Secretary [Bo Xilai](#), former Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) General [Xu Caihou](#) and former Politburo Standing Committee member [Zhou Youkang](#). It has been widely [interpreted](#) as party infighting, linked to the transition from the fourth to the fifth generation of CCP party leadership, with a view to consolidating Xi Jinping's power by eliminating his [enemies](#).

The ideological guidance campaign, qualified by some commentators as 'a stunning [regression](#) in ideology', or 'a call to [return](#) to Marxism', builds on concerns voiced by President Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, who, in 2012, [stated](#) that the Western world is 'threatening to divide us', and that 'the international culture of the West is strong while we are weak ... Ideological and cultural fields are their [the West's] main targets'. These concerns about ideology-damaging [Western influence](#) are further developed in Xi Jinping's calls for [ideological control](#) on Chinese universities. The campaign, which some analysts have even framed as '[Mao-style](#)', is based on document [No 9](#) which sets out the 'seven political perils' (see box) and the unpublished document [No 30](#). It coincides with the CCP's zero-tolerance approach to academic calls for political reforms, which have led to a [series](#) of recent dismissals of liberal [academics](#).

#### [The seven political perils](#)

1. Constitutionalism
2. Civil society
3. Historical nihilism
4. Universal values
5. Neo-liberalism
6. Western-style journalism
7. Challenging the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Time will show whether Xi Jinping's recently proclaimed '[Four Comprehensives](#)' will be China's future vision and become enshrined in the CCP Constitution as collective wisdom.

#### Xi Jinping's 'Four Comprehensives'

1. Comprehensively build a [modestly prosperous society](#)
2. Comprehensively deepen reform
3. Comprehensively govern the country according to the law
4. Comprehensively apply strictness in governing the party.

### The CCP's organisational structure

Despite the organisational changes the party has seen since its inception, the current CCP still features a traditional Leninist party structure with strong similarities to the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union. At the bottom of the pyramid structure is the **National Party Congress (NPC)**, which brings together delegates from constituencies at lower party levels. Since the 9th Party Congress in 1969, the CCP has [convened](#) the NPC every five years. Its meetings are considered to be of high symbolic significance, as they display CCP power and unity and, as a rule, mark milestones in party development.<sup>12</sup> During its session, its major task is to approve – rather than debate – major national policies and decisions worked out elsewhere in the party, and to elect the [Central Committee](#) (at the [2012](#) NPC: 205 members were elected, of which only ten are women, three fewer than in 2007). This meets yearly, and is vested with the NPC's functions when it is not in session. Given its size, it is not a venue for intensive debate.

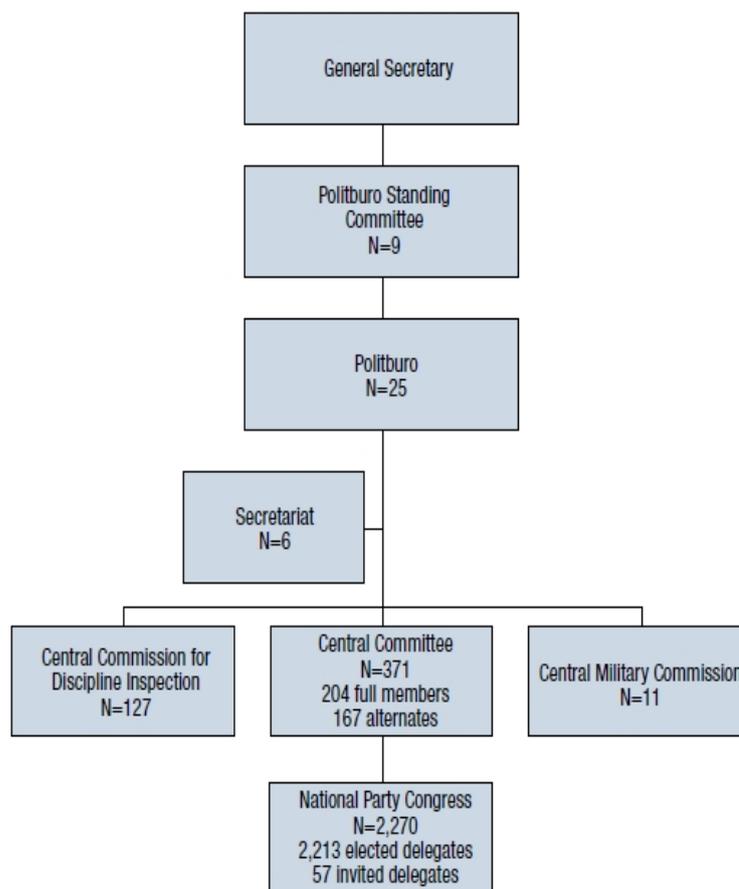
In theory, the Central Committee's mandate is to elect party members, in a *bottom-up* process, to higher-ranking CCP positions and bodies. These include the CCP's **General Secretary** (GS – a post reintroduced in 1982, when the position of party chairman was abolished), the **Politburo Standing Committee** (PSC), the **Politburo**, the **Central Commission for Discipline Inspection** (CCDI), which like other party bodies has a counterpart at all lower state levels and deals with party discipline and corruption, and since 2013, the [Central National Security Commission](#) (CNSC), formally established in January 2014 and [presided](#) by Xi Jinping. In practice, however, the process is carried out *top down* and is highly secretive, involving negotiating compromises between different party factions.<sup>13</sup> In this process the Central Committee only rubber-stamps the candidates for higher-level bodies as submitted by members of these leading party

organs. The membership of the **Secretariat**, the party's top implementing body, which in 1982 was downgraded in its relationship to the Politburo and the PSC, is only endorsed by the Central Committee.<sup>14</sup> The Chairman of the **Central Military Commission** (CMC) is [appointed](#) by the Central Committee.

The CCP Constitution is silent on the distribution of power between the **Politburo** and its **Standing Committee**, the highest collective decision-making organs of the party. It merely states that the Standing Committee exercises the functions of the Central Committee and the Politburo when they are not in session. The Politburo's size has increased, from 11 members in 1949 to 25 in 2007 (unchanged in [2012](#); two women). The **PSC**, which in 2012 was [reduced](#) from nine to seven members ([2012](#): no women) functions as the Politburo's reduced inner circle and meets weekly, while the Politburo in 2012 reportedly met only eight times.<sup>15</sup> [Membership](#) of the PSC has become largely formalised, in line with functional positions.

The PSC encompasses, among others, the GS, the Premier (head of the State Council) and the heads of the NPC, the [Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference](#) (CPPCC) and the CCDI. Since the 15th National Congress in 1997, the military has not been represented on the PSC.<sup>16</sup> Members of the **Politburo** are chosen based on a combination of functional and factional backgrounds.

**Figure 1 – Organisation of the CCP, reflecting the situation as of 2007 (17th National Congress)**



Source: Politics in China, Li C., 2010, p. 167.

The [party rules](#) do not prescribe a competitive election of the **GS**, who presides over the work of the Secretariat. Since the Jiang Zemin era, the GS has also held the position of Chairman and Commander-in-Chief of the **Central Military Commission** (CMC), which oversees the operations of the [People's Liberation Army](#) (PLA), without being bound by the [collective leadership](#) principle governing the other high-ranking CCP bodies.

The CCP structure also includes [Leading Small Groups](#) (LSGs), most of them attached to the various policy areas covered. They are party bodies aimed at fostering cross-agency coordination. Currently, Xi Jinping [leads](#) the Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms, established after the Third Plenum in 2013, which announced China's [2020 comprehensive reform package](#).

## The CCP's governance methods

### Democratic centralism and modest efforts to enhance intra-party democracy

Since the fifth National Congress in 1927, [democratic centralism](#) has been the CCP's guiding Leninist organisational principle, consisting of two elements: 'Socialist democracy' or 'intra-party democracy' and centralism. The democratic aspect of this organisational method [implies](#) that CCP members are free to discuss and debate matters of policy and direction. Centralism means that once the party's decision has been made, all members are expected to uphold that decision. Another aspect of the principle is that lower levels elect higher levels, which in turn take decisions and pass these down the hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> In reality, the election of members to higher-ranking bodies is carried out *top down* rather than *bottom up*, and lower-ranking members are selected by higher-ranking members without competitive elections. Thus in practice, the centralism element has largely out-weighted the democratic element.

Some modest steps to enhance intra-party democracy have focused on direct multi-candidate competitive elections of party committee members at [village](#) and [township](#) levels, [experimenting](#) with the contested election of city-level party secretaries in some provinces, and further implementing the selection of members to the Central Committee and the CCDI by proposing more candidates than seats available (in 2007 at least 8% of nominees were eliminated, compared with 5% in 2002). However, the 'more candidates than seats elections' for the Central Committee appears half-hearted as, since its adoption as early as 1987, it has [hardly](#) seen progress in scope and scale. For the selection of members to the highest-ranking CCP bodies at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, 400 elite party members participated in a '[democratic recommendation](#)' procedure, expressing their views on a list of 200 candidates for Politburo nominations. The leadership allegedly took this straw poll into account when drafting the final list of 25 Politburo nominees submitted for subsequent Central Committee approval.

### Institutional restraints on the exercise of power

To curtail the power of individuals at the top of the party, and to achieve a regular [turnover](#) of members in vital bodies, the CCP introduced some restraints on the exercise of power. These restraints consist of inner-party election and decision by vote, term limits (no more than two terms), age limits for retirement, which has eliminated to a large extent what was known as the 'gerontocracy' or the 'rule of the elderly', as well as the centuries-old Chinese 'law of avoidance' for selecting local mandarins (officials), preventing contemporary CCP cadres from holding a position in their native province'.<sup>18</sup>

### Leadership style: from individual to collective, consensus-based leadership

The first two CCP leaders, Chairman Mao and 'paramount leader' Deng, were at the centre of decision-making in a party with few institutionalised rules for the practical exercise of power at the top, despite a strong hierarchical party organisation. Mao's arbitrary leadership style, which facilitated purges of opponents and abrupt policy changes, was inextricably linked to personality cult and his direct link to the masses. Although after his death a prohibition of 'all forms of personality cult' was introduced in the CCP [Constitution](#), his successor Deng retained the highest decision-making power beyond his retirement until he passed away. This individual leadership style was gradually replaced by a collective leadership approach, which started to take root only under the terms of office of the less charismatic Presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. However, elderly high-profile CCP members still exercise influence on the selection of the CCP's most powerful positions in backdoor negotiations.

**Leadership succession: from informality to formality**

Despite Mao's far-reaching powers, he did not succeed in pushing through the successors he initially selected, as his death sparked fierce inner-party [power struggles](#). Deng lost two preselected successors, former General Secretaries [Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang](#), strong advocates of political reform, who proved to be too liberal. The transition to Jiang Zemin was protracted but smooth. Neither was the transfer of power to the fourth and fifth generation of CCP leaders disruptive, as the succession procedure became more [institutionalised](#). Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao were not able to select their successors, revealing their limited political sway in this regard, and the application of the collective leadership principle for decision-making. However, [leadership succession](#) has remained a concentrated and secretive procedure.

**Emerging bipartisanship as a new form of checks and balances?**

Since the Mao era, inner-party factions (informal groups) are the expression of differing views of the party's future direction. The ['whateverist' faction](#) which pledged 'support to whatever policy decisions were made by Chairman Mao' was opposed by the Deng-led **pragmatist faction**, which advocated a less ideological approach to policy-making under the dictum ['practice is the sole criterion for testing truth'](#). These factions shared the same revolutionary background, but differed in their approach to ideology. In the recent past, CCP factions have become more complex, and may be said to be part of an emerging Chinese [political landscape](#). Two broad [factions](#) can be distinguished by their members' social background, personal loyalties and career paths. These may not necessarily mirror real political preferences within the CCP, as some leaders combine both characteristics, but they have been referred to as a Chinese form of bipartisanship, serving as a new form of [checks and balances](#).

The ['taizidang'](#), ['princeling'](#), or **elitist faction** is a group of CCP leaders who are 'born red' as the children of veterans of the revolution or former high-ranking officials. Based on their family connections they receive a first-class education and benefit from privileged access to power. The taizidang advocate further liberalisation of the market economy and the creation of a 'modestly prosperous society'. They tend to give priority to promoting the private sector and the development of the provinces on the east coast, which they usually govern. Social inequality and environmental degradation take second place. The elitist coalition represents the interests of the growing middle class, notably business people. The taizidang faction accounts for the [majority](#) of the seven members in the current Politburo Standing Committee, including [President Xi Jinping](#), who is strongly [supportive](#) of Shanghai's growing role as a financial and shipping centre.

The ['tuanpai'](#), **League** or **populist faction** refers to a group of Chinese leaders who come from humbler backgrounds. They are also called meritocrats, as they have risen to power through the party's selection procedures, starting with membership in the [Communist Youth League](#). The tuanpai advocate a shift of China's policy priorities away from breakneck economic growth strategies, towards fostering wealth redistribution to address the vast social inequality between rural and urban areas and to achieve a 'harmonious society'. They usually govern provinces other than the fast-growing, affluent coastal provinces. The tuanpai defend the interests of vulnerable social groups such as farmers, migrant workers, and poor urban workers. Premier [Li Keqiang](#) represents the tuanpai faction in the current Politburo Standing Committee. He [promotes](#) reform of the household registration system ([hukou](#)) which facilitates the settlement of migrant workers in urban areas, affordable housing, basic healthcare and clean industries.

## Prospects for democratic reform?

Since its inception, the CCP has witnessed transformations of varying degrees in its ideology, organisational structure, governance principles, leadership style, leadership succession rules as well as membership size and composition (surge in well-educated technocrats and private-sector businessmen and lawyers) which have allowed it to safeguard its legitimacy and thus its longevity.<sup>19</sup> Prospects are [bleak](#) for major political reforms, that might entail democratisation of the party-state, triggered from *outside* the CCP by an opposition party challenging the CCP's control as the sole political party with 'genuine influence' in Chinese politics. This gloomy outlook results mainly from the CCP leadership's conviction that 'the party monitors itself'. It [continues](#) to 'reject any idea of outside scrutiny'. The short-lived [China Democracy Party](#), whose leaders were frustrated in their attempts to organise then imprisoned, illustrates the [impossibility](#) for an opposition party to take root in China.

Gradual democratisation *inside* the party is more likely in a long-term perspective.<sup>20</sup> However, outspoken liberal CCP leaders such as former CCP General Secretaries Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, who strongly advocated political reforms in the 1980s, were removed from their positions. Despite the much touted encouragement of intra-party democracy in recent years, the [speeches](#) of former Premier Wen Jiabao on the '[seven calls for political reform](#)' are [said](#) to have been censored, with political restructuring ultimately having been promoted with '[vigorous yet steady efforts](#)'.

Beyond the CCP's modest and hesitant moves towards enhancing intra-party democracy, in line with the State Council's 2005 [White Paper 'Building Political Democracy in China'](#), it has pursued the idea of more systematically involving [eight small non-communist parties](#) in the policy-making process within the long-established [Multi-party Cooperation and Political Consultation System](#).<sup>21</sup> These eight parties make up the United Front and are referred to by the CCP as the 'democratic parties'. They are deeply rooted in socialism and trade unionism, existed prior to the CCP's establishment and accept the CCP's sole leadership. They are legally recognised, but their survival is founded on the premise that they abstain from challenging the CCP's dominant role and policy. The CCP consultation process with the United Front parties in the fields of political, economic, cultural and social affairs is [institutionalised](#) in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

## Further reading

[China's Political Institutions and Leaders in Charts](#), Lawrence S. V., Congressional Research Service (CRS), November 2013.

[Power from the People, for the People': the Communist Party of China and Political Reform with Chinese Characteristics](#), Golden S., CIDOB, December 2014.

[The Communist Party of China and Ideology](#), Brown K., *An International Journal*, Vol. 10(2), August 2012, pp. 52-68.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> China's Communist Party-State: The Structure and Dynamics of Power, Li C., in: *Politics in China. An Introduction*, Joseph W.A. (ed.), 2010, pp. 165-191, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Party-states belong to a specific type of political system. They share a number of common features. First, the Communist Party is the ultimate source of power. It controls the state despite an organisational separation between party and state which often display similar bodies with identical membership. Second, the party-state adheres to Marxism-Leninism, the exclusive ideology, and is committed to building socialism as an intermediate step to the creation of an egalitarian communist society. Third, the Communist Party considers itself a vanguard party which due to its advanced ideology merits the leading role. Fourth, the Communist Party claims to represent

the 'people's' interests and thus requires for itself a monopoly on political power, which excludes opposition from other political forces, which by definition are enemies of the people. Fifth, Communist Parties exercise strong control over the economy of their country, which in the case of China has not prevented the country from introducing capitalist elements to boost economic growth. Studying Chinese Politics, Joseph W.A., in: Politics in China. An Introduction, Joseph W.A. (ed.), 2010, pp. 3-33, p. 13.

- <sup>3</sup> Analysing the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union CCP leaders found that one reason for its downfall was an ideology that has become 'rigid, unimaginative, ossified, and disconnected from reality.' Since they neither wished to embrace an inflexible ideology potentially leading to the CCP's collapse nor to endorse an alternative ideology like social democracy (as per Gorbachev), as this would have deprived the party of its raison d'être, CCP leaders opted to adapt the party's ideology to accommodate 'policy decisions taken on non-ideological grounds.' China's Communist Party. Atrophy and Adaptation, Shambaugh D., 2008, p. 105.
- <sup>4</sup> Ideology and Chinese Politics, Joseph W.A., in: Politics in China. An Introduction, op. cit., p. 159.
- <sup>5</sup> On 5 December 1978, Wei Jingsheng, then editor of the journal [Exploration](#) and author of the essay [Democracy – The Fifth Modernisation](#), posted on the Democracy Wall in Beijing the Fifth Modernisation as being 'democracy'. He was arrested and imprisoned for many years. Politics in China since 1949. Legitimizing authoritarian rule, Weatherley, R., 2006, pp. 95-96. In 1996, he was [awarded](#) the European Parliament's [Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought](#) as the 'father of the Chinese democracy movement'.
- <sup>6</sup> 'There is no fundamental contradiction between socialism and a market economy ... While giving way to the advantages inherent in socialism, we are also employing some capitalist methods – only as methods of accelerating the growth of productive forces ... China has no alternative but to follow this road.' Deng Xiaoping cited in: Understanding Chinese Politics. An Introduction to Government in the People's Republic of China, Collins N. and Cotter A., 2012, p. 31.
- <sup>7</sup> Governance and Politics in China, Saich, T., 2011, p. 133.
- <sup>8</sup> Deng Xiaoping and His Successors, Gilley B., in: Politics in China. An Introduction, op. cit., p. 105.
- <sup>9</sup> Governance and Politics in China, Saich, T., 2011, p. 133.
- <sup>10</sup> China's Communist Party-State: The Structure and Dynamics of Power, Li C., in: Politics in China. An Introduction, Joseph W.A. (ed.), 2010, pp. 165-191, p. 158.
- <sup>11</sup> Ideology and Chinese Politics, Joseph W.A., in: Politics in China. An Introduction, op. cit., p. 159.
- <sup>12</sup> Governance and Politics in China, Saich, T., 2011, p. 114.
- <sup>13</sup> For details on the composition of the current CCP bodies see the [official homepage](#).
- <sup>14</sup> Governance and Politics in China, Saich, T., 2011, pp. 117-118.
- <sup>15</sup> [Understanding China's Political System](#), Lawrence S.V. and Martin M.F., CRS, March 2013, p. 22.
- <sup>16</sup> Governance and Politics in China, Saich, T., 2011, pp. 118-119.
- <sup>17</sup> China's Political System. Modernization and Tradition, Dreyer J.T., 2006, p. 88.
- <sup>18</sup> Ideology and Chinese Politics, Joseph, W.A., in: Politics in China. An Introduction, op. cit., p. 185.
- <sup>19</sup> A 2010 [survey](#) revealed a high level of satisfaction of Chinese people with national conditions, which was found to be steadily [declining](#) from the central to the local level where dissatisfaction with governance is strongest.
- <sup>20</sup> [Country Report: Country outlook: Political: Short-term outlook: Analysis – China](#), IHS, 13 February 2015.
- <sup>21</sup> China's Communist Party. Atrophy and Adaptation, Shambaugh, D., 2008, pp. 137-138.

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