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No. 060/2022 dated 3 November 2022

The Loyalty-Competence Trade-off in Xi Jinping's Selection of Party Top Brass

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SYNOPSIS

*The 20th national congress of the Communist Party of China concluded last month with Xi Jinping loyalists filling all the positions at the top echelons of the party. Using machine-learning techniques to quantitatively measure the new Politburo members' level of competence, **JONGHYUK LEE** argues that Xi Jinping suffers from the dictator's dilemma of not being able to choose competent subordinates owing to the fear of revolts.*

COMMENTARY

With the 20th national congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) having [ended](#), the top stratum of the party, the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), has been wholly reconstituted. The winners were Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang, and Li Xi. The list has startled the world since all the newly appointed men are well known as confidants of Xi Jinping; members from opposing factions were cleansed from the top echelons of the CPC leadership. It is apparent that Xi Jinping has fully consolidated his power and that there are no more checks and balances within the CPC leadership. Factional balance in the collective leadership, which is known as one of the established mechanisms to maintain the CPC's accountability and curtail the possibility of a one-man dictatorship, has been competently dismantled.



President Xi Jinping moving towards a one-person dictatorship? *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

Using Machine-Learning Techniques to Assess the New Leadership

Consequently, many experts have [started to doubt](#) the competence of the newly formed PSC since the main selection criterion seems to be personal closeness to Xi, not objective criteria such as credentials or performance records. Li Qiang and Cai Qi worked with Xi when the latter was party secretary of Zhejiang. Zhao Leji and Li Xi managed to cultivate connections with Xi and Xi's family through their working experiences in Shaanxi, the president's home province. Ding Xuexiang was known as Xi's personal aide when Xi was party secretary of Shanghai. Either directly or indirectly, all the PSC members have personal relationships with Xi Jinping. However, can we automatically reject the possibility that Xi Jinping's close allies could also be competent and conscientious officials?

To systematically evaluate whether an official is competent or not, I adopted machine-learning techniques to estimate predicted probabilities of promotion. By summarising all measurable determinants of promotion, the predicted probability of promotion enables a systematic assessment of an official's qualification for promotion. My inputs for machine-learning prediction were extensive biographical and career information for over 20,000 high-ranking CPC officials from 1982 to 2021. The model was trained with over 300 variables of individual features, including biographical information (e.g., age, gender, education level, and ethnicity), career (e.g., seniority, tenure, administrative experience, and job diversity), context (e.g., geopolitical characteristics of working experience), faction (e.g., competing affiliations in Chinese top politics), and networks (e.g., political connections).

Assessments

The machine-learning outcome demonstrated that the most qualified candidate for the PSC was Hu Chunhua, followed by Chen Quanguo, Wang Chen, and Yang Jiechi. However, none of the machine-learning model's top selections was chosen as PSC member. This is clear evidence that Xi Jinping has dismantled the traditional institution of meritocratic selection and imposed his personal whims on the selection process. The new PSC members occupied lower rankings in the machine-learning outcome, indicating that they were not the candidates due for promotion, based on meritocratic criteria. For example, Ding Xuexiang was ranked 7th out of 19 candidates, Li Xi 16th, Li Qiang 14th, and Cai Qi 17th.

In particular, Hu Chunhua was the official who was frequently singled out by experts and policymakers prior to the party congress as [being prime minister material](#). In contrast, the credentials of the incoming premier, Li Qiang, threw some doubt on his competence to take over the state council. Although his administrative experience ranges across many regions, such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Shanghai, those are relatively developed regions. The CPC has [highlighted his competence](#) by pointing out his achievements in those provinces, particularly his successful invitation to Tesla to establish its mega factory in Shanghai. However, it is not easy to differentiate his ability to attract Tesla from the inherent endowments of Shanghai as the most attractive investment target in China: Tesla would have chosen Shanghai anyway, even if Li Qiang had not been in charge of the city and assiduously wooed the company.

Historically, one of the major rationales for previous CPC leaderships to dispatch young and promising officials to underdeveloped regions was to test their true competence. Li Qiang's capability has never been proven as leader of a region in crisis before he dealt with COVID-19 in Shanghai. Given that Shanghai's intensive lockdown policy has aggravated [public grievances](#) significantly, one cannot conclude that Li Qiang is particularly competent, compared with other leaders. The machine-learning model in fact could identify the varied characteristics of each province and ranked Li Qiang much lower than Hu Chunhua, even though both men had administrative experience in the same number of regions (i.e., Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Shanghai for Li Qiang and Tibet, Hebei, and Inner Mongolia for Hu Chunhua).

The official career profiles of the other newly minted PSC members also display similar weaknesses. Ding Xuexiang developed most of his career in Shanghai, and Cai Qi only in Zhejiang and Beijing. The two members who have had the experience of working in underdeveloped provinces are Zhao Leji (e.g., Qinghai) and Li Xi (e.g., Gansu). However, the reason they started from those poor western provinces is that they were either born there or in neighbouring provinces — Zhao Leji in Shaanxi and Li Xi in Gansu itself. On the other hand, candidates from the hitherto powerful Youth League (e.g., Li Keqiang, Wang Yang, and Hu Chunhua) had been systematically transferred to underdeveloped regions as part of the cadre training regime. These are regions not directly connected to any of the top leaders and their posting there was only intended to test their true capabilities.

That these men were dropped in favour of less experienced candidates is evidence that the traditional mechanisms, esteemed as the most crucial components of China's remarkable growth, notably, meritocracy based on qualifications and performance records, have been weakened during Xi's leadership.

Towards One-Person Dictatorship?

Choosing loyal but incompetent subordinates for high-ranking positions is clear evidence that Xi's administration is being transformed into a one-person dictatorship. Although there have been many signals pointing to Xi's attempt to dominate the CPC's internal politics, some experts still believed the [traditional mechanism](#) of collective leadership would curtail individual influence in political selection. Unfortunately, two weeks ago, the world observed what is effectively the revival of the Mao era: Xi Jinping simply reaffirmed that governmental accountability is unlikely to be maintained without the system of checks and balances that a collective leadership, if not strong democratic institutions, would entail.

China's turn towards a strong autocracy suggests that it will suffer the same problems that other autocracies encounter. Xi Jinping would face a dictator's dilemma: the more power acquired, the higher the possibility of being overthrown. Xi cannot be fully assured of the loyalty of his subjects as people would tend to hide their true preferences and only make a show of support for a dictator. Therefore, he prefers loyalty over competence because competent subordinates would be more likely to use insider information to revolt against a dictator. Xi Jinping is worried about potential threats from opposing factions. Ironically, the fact that there are opposing factions is one of the proofs that Xi Jinping's legitimacy within the party is not as well consolidated as that of Deng Xiaoping's. Deng allowed a plurality of opinions within the CPC leadership and stimulated policy discussions among officials from different factional origins. He was able to do so because he had undeniable legitimacy and authority over the party.

In contrast, Xi Jinping has not allowed the airing of opinions that go against his thoughts and official policy lines, indicating that he is not confident in his legitimacy level and does not want to embroil himself in unnecessary disputes when it comes to implementing policies in line with his ideology. As the leader of the Youth League faction, Li Keqiang, the outgoing premier, is a [well-known opponent](#) of Xi Jinping's policy approaches and could not be retained. Wang Yang was another frequently mentioned candidate for the premiership. However, he was forced to retire even though he has not reached the conventional retirement age of 68. Given that Xi has emphasised resource centralisation, state-led development, and economic security, someone like Wang Yang, [whose expertise](#) has been built on economic liberalism and market-oriented reforms, would not have been the best candidate to do Xi's bidding.

Xi's power consolidation and personalisation of leadership may stabilise his position in the short term. However, it is likely to impair the Chinese government's overall capacity to cope with China's many intractable socio-economic issues, which require collective knowledge for long-term development.

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