

## **The 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and the Inauguration of the Xi Jinping Leadership: Its Significance and Prospects**

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Online Series CO 12-40

### **The Inauguration of the Xi Jinping Leadership**

With the world's attention at his feet, Xi Jinping emerged as China's new leader on November 15. His emergence was somewhat different from that of past Chinese leaders. General Secretary Xi spoke with a virtuous smile on his face during his interview with journalists and tried to present an easygoing and friendly image by refraining from the use of a difficult or rigid language. Xi's flexible attitude from when he introduced his colleagues even kindled hopes that China under his leadership would deviate from its existing image as rigid and aggressive and instead, become accepting and cooperative in the future. Indeed, the world has expressed concerns over the rise of China. It is hard to deny that its rise has become a threat to South Korea, since China is one of the closest countries directly engaged in the North Korean nuclear issue. Moreover, there are various other conflicts with China, such as economic trade frictions, illegal fishing on the Yellow Sea, divergent views toward the North Korean nuclear issue and the U.S.-China military tensions in regard to the Korean Peninsula. Although China has continuously emphasized that it strives to harmonize peace with its neighboring countries by avoiding competition for regional dominance, the grim reality is that China's rapid growth has already created dissonance. Based on this account, the emergence of a gentle Xi Jinping may dissipate concerns from our side. However, the problem remains that China is not controlled by Xi Jinping alone.

The 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (hereinafter the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress) commands our attention because it inaugurates the power groups that will rule China for the next term. Behind the closed-doors of the Bamboo Curtain, the lineup for supreme power in the upcoming term was a complete failure for Hu Jintao in accordance with the analysis of factions. This is due to the fact that figures affiliated with the *Gongqingtuan* (Communist Youth League), also known as the so-called influence of Hu, have failed to become members of the Politburo Standing Committee. In addition, former President Hu's political power came to an end at an officially institutionalized aspect when Xi attained the position as Chairman of the Party Central Military Commission, unlike the situation of former President Jiang Zemin. However, even if Hu's power has declined, it would be difficult to assert that Xi's power has concurrently strengthened. Of course, it is likely probable that the early leadership under Xi Jinping will be more secure as well as stable due to the dominance of the core power classified as the Shanghai Clique (Elitist Coalition) and the Crown Prince Party, in comparison to the early period of Hu's leadership. But this must not neglect the structural problem in the Chinese power elitist system. The limitations of the analysis of factions among the powerful Chinese elites already have been raised many times, and if anything, the possibility of powerful elites forming diverse alliances and coalitions is more likely due to the factions' overlapping and ambiguous characteristics. As the time passes by, a reflection on the glory of Deng Xiaoping's absolute power, which lasted until Jiang Zemin faded, and the alliances and coalitions among the powerful elites, who depend on individual interests and political inclinations instead of the particular cliques, have become possible. More euphemistically, it means that the Chinese-style collective leadership system has become more consolidated as well as institutionalized, while the potential for decentralization of the leadership or discord of agreement, instead of one man's orderly control, is expected to rise. Examining the analysis of factions, many officials from the *Gongqingtuan*, who are categorized as affiliates of former President Hu, have become Politburo members, who are the highest-ranking elites. Under the current system, Hu's five closest associates in the standing committee members are scheduled to leave their posts after five years in accordance with the age limitation of 68 years, and this will become a time constraint, as they will attempt to aggressively express their own opinions before retirement. In addition, rigorous checks and competition among affiliates of the *Gongqingtuan* are expected. Ultimately, the harmonized coordination and agreement of the tensions and checks among factions are the Xi leadership's foremost task in maintaining stability. For this main reason, we pay attention to the consolidation of China's collective system over Xi's charismatic one-man rule.

## The Demands of the Times and Alternatives to the Chaos

Apart from an individual's influence, the stability of the Xi government largely depends on how China will overcome impending challenges and crises at home and abroad. In the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress report (hereinafter the 18<sup>th</sup> Report) and Xi's inaugural speech, impending core issues that must be resolved under the new leadership were raised. The most important and arduous task is the fight against corruption. Due to the scandals of the disgraced Bo Xilai and other corrupt cadres, the public's distrust toward the corrupt Chinese elites is very high, and it appears that the new leadership's large-scale anti-corruption campaign

should not simply be an optimistic speech. The problem is the question of whether an effective solution can be presented. This is due to the fact that the top Chinese political elites cannot also be free from corruption scandals. The proverb states, “As is the king, so is the people.” Thus, there is no way of knowing whether realistic alternatives, such as property registration for public officials, can defy resistance from the Communist Party elites and be implemented in full-scale.

Second is the improvement of the people’s livelihoods. Given that the 18<sup>th</sup> Report emphasizes that “China must take the path of mutual opulence without fail,” it appears that the future direction for China’s development is expected to focus on the distribution rather than growth. The emphasis on social justice as well as fair distribution is a pressing demand of the times, and this perception of reality is not significantly different from those of the former Hu leadership and the newly inaugurated Xi leadership as well. Despite these similar goals, it may be difficult to find a common ground on the methods that are utilized to realize these objectives among the elite groups. This is attributed to the fact that most of the top elites have become accustomed to market-focused growth methods in particular regions, such as Shanghai and the Guangdong Province. Unlike the Hu era that capitalized on methods for national control and expansion of state-owned territory, it appears that the elites are more inclined to prefer methods that strengthen national power through the expansion of the private sectors and the market. Obviously, the role of state territories, including the establishment of a new system in social welfare, is expected to increase. However, this may be beyond the national capacity to provide sufficient compensation with some groups falling behind in competition during the process of expanding private sectors. Moreover, it cannot rule out the internal conflicts among the elite factions, who wallow in nostalgia for the policies of the Hu era.

Third is the national unity. During the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP, Tibetan monks protested against the Chinese government’s suppression of religious freedom and independence through self-immolation. The new Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping used expressions of a “great Chinese nation” and emphasized the People’s Republic of China and its national unity in his inaugural address. This is due to the fact that the issue of ethnic groups in China will always remain a problem. Although it is certainly natural to emphasize national unity in a country like China, which is composed of multiple ethnic groups, Xi must demonstrate the nation’s improved responsibility in accordance with its status in the international community. Behaviors that disregard universal norms in the international community by simply emphasizing national revitalization as well as violating the human rights and fundamental freedoms of ethnic groups around the country under the guise of Chinese nationalism must certainly be rectified.

Finally, it is the issue of communication with the rest of the world. China’s new collective leadership should provide its neighboring countries with a definite answer to the concerns of China as a threat. We realize that the international order has endured many changes since the rise of China. Events, such as the political and economic conflicts between the U.S. and China, territorial disputes between China and Japan as well as among China and Southeast Asian countries and the discord between China and the ROK in regard to the North Korean nuclear issue, have emerged in the process of renewing international power in accordance with the rise of China. China’s new leadership must present a clearer vision and solution

to address its rising threat against the surrounding nation rather than simply spewing lame excuses, such as that it is compulsory to remain in a defensive position against neighboring countries who are vigilant and maintain checks on China. Though China affirmed in the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress that it will strive to harmonize peaceful development through the establishment of a Socialist cultural powerhouse and improvement of its national soft power, it has not fulfilled its promises. China needs to provide clear messages of its intentions for peaceful development instead of merely confirming its increase in cultural exchanges and the Confucius academy, but there are still many ambiguous rhetoric and figures of speech that China has yet to clarify.

## The Temptation of the Great Chinese People

Facing the impending challenges and crises under Xi, where is China heading? The most concerning part is how the new leadership will coordinate different voices from Chinese stakeholders at home. With economic prosperity as well as diversification in society, political influence in all levels of society, including the top elites, military, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, media reporters or journalists and civilians forces who use occasionally violence, has broadened, and the interests among these people conflict with one another. Somehow, this phenomenon can be interpreted as the diversification of the Chinese political system. Though it has been analyzed that Xi Jinping has close ties with the military and is expected to control the military under the title as Chairman of the Party Central Military Commission, it hardly changes the grim reality in which the military has already exercised considerable power in the Chinese foreign policy decision-making for its own interests. There will be more troubling situations ahead should China adopt an aggressive foreign expansion, especially when the military's propensity for toughness and the forces of nationalism merge. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Report, China reassured that it would take the path toward peaceful development and not seek regional hegemony. Despite these statements, China also confirmed that it would "strictly protect its national sovereignty, security and development interest" "without yielding to any forms of external pressure whatsoever" and build a strong military "in accordance with China's international status." These statements reflect China's future intentions of becoming a more active participant in its foreign policy. Of course, these interpretations may derive from excessive observation. As China insists, its statement will apply to every country on Earth and not just to China, as a sphere of its core interest; according to Chinese claims, a country's military power is subject to increase following economic growth and every country's national sovereignty and security are considered key interests. However, China's statement that emphasizes the interest of national security and military strength can be of grave concerns to neighboring countries, whose anxiety and vigilance against China's rise push them toward the U.S., amid the current U.S. policy of a "pivot to Asia" and "strategic rebalancing."

In addition, General Secretary Xi's emphasis on the revival of a great Chinese nation mentioned at the beginning of his inaugural speech can generate misunderstandings and portray the rise of China as aggressive and threatening. If there are no tangible outcomes to the diverse internal crisis proposed by the Xi leadership, then Chinese nationalism under the "great and powerful Chinese nation" can be utilized as a means of temporarily dissipating domestic unrest. This so-called nationalism card can be considered

more effective than the ambiguous ruling ideology of the Chinese-style socialism. If the Xi administration is exposed to this temptation, then it is likely probable that China's future foreign policy will exhibit fairly emotional and irrational aggressive behavior rather than rationale and logic.

## The Future of China and the Korean Peninsula

Then, how will the future relations between China under Xi and the Korean Peninsula unfold? Frankly, it is impossible to establish a clear explanation on China's policy toward the Korean Peninsula through the outcome of the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress. As some media reports have raised, although there have been high hopes on the emergence of the so-called "pro-Korean groups" in the new leadership, China's policy toward the Korean Peninsula has been determined by a political framework rather than specific individuals, and it is more likely to be affected by environmental factors, such as international politics. Overall, there are two scenarios concerning the future relations between China and the Korean Peninsula. First, the new Chinese leadership will seek cooperation with the U.S., at least at a regional level in Northeast Asia. In this situation, it is highly probable that China's political strategy toward the Korean Peninsula will maintain the existing policy under Hu Jintao's second-term leadership. That is, the policy goals will to uphold peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and expand China's influence into South and North Korea equally through diplomacy. In terms of its relations with South Korea, China's policy goals will likely aim to increase cooperation and reduce diplomatic frictions. It is not in China's strategic interest to increase tensions with South Korea, one of its largest trading partners, and China aims to fully contain the expansion of the U.S.-led alliance amid the heightened vigilance among neighboring countries against its own rise. Particularly since the year 2010, China has raised concerns over the extended military cooperation between South Korea and Japan under the conditions of strengthening the alliances between the U.S. and South Korea and the U.S. and Japan, respectively. With the latest tensions between South Korea and Japan escalating, South Korea's strategic value, as a catalyst to induce a break in the alliance against the U.S. and as a cooperative partner to alleviate the threat of Japan, has increased as well. More than ever, the opportunity to diversify cooperative ties in South Korea-China relations is wide open. Immediately after the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress, the pro-South Korean CCP delegates visited Seoul on November 20 in order to detail the latest outcome of the National Congress and the new leadership's policy direction on South Korea. It is a good sign that the new Chinese government has started to regard South Korea as an important political partner.

It is likely that the Xi government will implement a more active participatory policy toward North Korea by succeeding the policies under former President Hu. As the stability of the Kim Jong-un regime remains a top priority, it is likely that China will resolve the North Korean nuclear issue in a gradual or mid- to long-term basis as well as place an emphasis on expanding influences into the North through bilateral economic cooperation. General Secretary Xi used to be a key member in foreign policy decision-making and understands that China's pressure toward North Korea induces unexpected behaviors, so the insecurity of the Northeast Asian region has become a significant influence to the core Chinese national interests. If the Kim Jong-un regime once more uses military adventurism as leverage to heighten its bargaining power with the second-term Obama administration, then it is highly probable that the clashes

between the U.S. and China will reemerge. North Korea, being a decisive factor, will only add substantial burden to the Xi leadership. Thus, if China develops cooperative ties with the U.S., then there is hope for a strategic cooperation to resolve the North's nuclear issue.

However, anticipating a pessimistic situation is a more likely scenario. Under the circumstance that conflicts between the U.S. and China deteriorate, the new Xi Jinping leadership will not be able to cope with the internal discord and the ruling party's legitimacy will weaken. In this case, a binding power between the Chinese military and the nationalistic forces will expand, and the new leadership will very easily succumb and adopt an aggressive foreign policy as a means to consolidate its internal security. If this situation develops, then it is likely that China's policy on the Korean Peninsula will be different from now and lose balance. Some of the Chinese nationalists, who endorse a powerful country, insist that the U.S. obstruction to the rise of China is a matter of subjugation, not fear. These nationalists recognize the need to expand military ties with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Myanmar, Cambodia and Pakistan as well as North Korea in order to overtake the U.S.-led military alliance. This also coincides with the interests of the Chinese military and the nationalistic forces. If the Xi leadership falls into temptation of becoming a powerful nation, then North Korea's strategic value will drastically increase. Consequently, it is likely that China will apply pressure on South Korea in regard to the U.S.-Korea alliance.

Of course, the aforementioned case will be a worst-case scenario, but it appears certain that the new Xi leadership will strengthen active participation by implementing its foreign policy, in contrast to his predecessors. Even if China were willing to cooperate with its neighboring countries, there would be no change to policies on issues that directly concern its core national interests. Moreover, China is determined to become a military power, while the reelected President Obama is expected to maintain a "strategic rebalancing" in his second-term foreign policy. Thus, it is likely that military tensions between the U.S. and China will persist as well. This pessimistic reality will be a considerable burden on the future of the Korean Peninsula. The succeeding South Korean government must formulate an effective measure to gain strategic interests, while avoiding any repercussions that result from the conflicts between China and its neighbors due to the external expansion of China's foreign policy. The South Korean government must strive to achieve the following endeavors so that the discord between the U.S. and China does not affect to the Korean Peninsula, while also prepare to consolidate strategic communication and cooperation with China and strengthen the U.S.-Korea alliance. Most of all, the South Korean government must bear in mind that expanding cooperation with the Chinese leadership is an obligatory task in order to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. © KINU 2012

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