

China watched for sign of new leader

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China's governing Communist Party will convene its annual policy meeting on Tuesday with a sober, if not soporific, mandate to root out government corruption and make the party adapt to changing times.

But lurking in the background is a more compelling topic: Who will become China's next ruler in 2012?

Analysts will watch the meeting, the annual plenary session of the party's 17th Central Committee, to see whether Vice President Xi Jinping is given the additional title of vice chairman of the Central Military Commission.

Such an appointment would be seen as a confirmation that Mr. Xi, 56, is set to succeed President Hu Jintao when Mr. Hu's second term ends in 2012. Any Chinese leader must have experience in leading the military, which is under party control. Mr. Hu was awarded the same post in 1999, three years before he became the party's general secretary in 2002.

Yet Chinese politics are so opaque that no outsider can say for certain that Mr. Xi, the presumed heir, will win the position — or that there will be a mark against him should he not.

"There is no foregone conclusion these days," said a political analyst at a Beijing institution tied to the Communist Party.

Whether that is true is a central question hanging over the meeting this week. Since the founding of the People's Republic 60 years ago, the Communist Party has governed both the Chinese people and itself strictly from the top down, with all important actions approved by a handful of party leaders united by power and personal relationships.

Officially, at least, the 204 Central Committee members meeting this week have been given an agenda to shake up that model. The members are supposed to prepare plans to bring democracy to the party's inner deliberations, choosing new leaders by consensus, not by the dictates of those at the top.

"A new crop of leaders who grew up after the reform and opening up started are going to step into new leadership roles" in 2012, Zhen Xiaoying, a professor at the Communist Party's central party school, stated in a recent article in the state-run newspaper People's Daily. He was referring to the period of economic reform that began in 1978.

"The era of relying on authority and personal charm to run the party is over," he said.

Mr. Xi and Mr. Hu epitomize that shift. Mr. Hu, 66, joined the party in 1964, two years before Mao's Cultural Revolution brought China a decade of social and political chaos. Mr. Xi joined in 1974, two years after President Richard M. Nixon first visited Beijing and China began to reconnect to the outside world.

Mr. Hu was the party's designated successor to Jiang Zemin, who ruled a battened-down China after the bloody suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

The process of political succession in China's one-party system is always shrouded in intrigue. The party elite elevated Mr. Xi to the ruling Politburo Standing Committee in 2007 and gave him the highest rank of any leader of his age group, signaling that he had been chosen to succeed Mr. Hu when the latter's second five-year stint as top leader ends in 2012. But the

party's internal deliberations on such matters are in the highest order of state secret, and there has been no public confirmation of Mr. Xi's status.

Whatever changes the plenum orders are unlikely to resemble democracy as Westerners know it. China has long shunned Western democracy, branding it anarchy, and embraced what it calls "democratic centralism" — essentially, passing carefully reviewed suggestions from lower-level party organs to leaders at the top.

Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, recently quoted Mr. Hu as saying that democratic centralism would remain China's guiding version of democracy. One liberal political analyst who has called for a more open Chinese society, Liu Junning, argued in a telephone interview that prospects for genuine changes this week were dim.

"I think it is important in China first to strengthen formal institutions such as the legislature and the court system, rather than informal structures such as the ruling party," he said. "Let's see if there are any open factions within the party — any open opposition, any open minorities."

China's governing elite, like any group, has factions, but they are tightly cloaked. Mr. Xi, for example, is widely believed to be the favorite of Mr. Jiang, who still has considerable sway in retirement.

After Mao wreaked havoc with the party hierarchy by designating and then toppling multiple successors, the party's elite clawed back the power to oversee political succession. Mr. Hu was effectively designated China's future top leader in 1992, leaving Mr. Jiang, then the new No. 1 official, little choice in the matter. Likewise, Mr. Hu's apparent favorite, Deputy Prime Minister Li Keqiang, was not selected as his future successor, though Mr. Li is now considered likely to be the next prime minister.

The plenum will be closely watched for any signs that internal politicking has kept the succession contest alive.

The analyst at the Communist Party institution, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press, said he believed that Mr. Xi might not win the military post this week. "If he doesn't," he said, "it would show that there's more of a balance of power. But it would not mean that Xi lost the opportunity."

The plenum is also scheduled to take up anticorruption measures that could include a requirement that some party officials disclose their holdings of property or financial instruments.

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