China: CCP plenum on tightening party discipline signals inner crisis

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The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been meeting in closed-door session this week to focus on a further tightening of party discipline as President Xi Jinping, who is also CCP general secretary, consolidates his grip on power. The four-day plenum started on Monday and is the sixth since Xi was installed as party leader in late 2012.

Xi's determination to stamp out any threat from rivals is not just the product of personal ambition, but reflects the inner crisis of the Stalinist regime which confronts a slowing economy, mounting social and class tensions and Washington's aggressive "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining and subordinating China. The CCP, which is riven with factional divisions and rests on a narrow social base, represents above all the interests of the super-wealthy oligarchs who have enriched themselves from the processes of capitalist restoration over the past four decades.

After assuming office, Xi launched a sweeping anti-corruption campaign that has resulted in punishment being meted out to more than one million CCP members. The Chinese president has used the purge to weaken and remove factional rivals and make a pitch to broad public hostility against the privileged bureaucratic apparatus that presides over a widening social gulf between rich and poor.

In a televised speech last Friday, Xi outlined the agenda for this week's sixth plenum, declaring that "we must strengthen the party's leadership, persist with strict party discipline." Pointing to the dangers confronting the regime, he said: "We must work to prevent the systemic risk [in the economy] and avoid the risks of [political] upheavals."

The plenum takes place in the lead-up to next year's CCP congress which will preside over leadership changes. While Xi and Premier Li Keqiang seem certain to retain their positions on the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee—the party's top decision making body, the other five members are due to stand down. Xi is seeking to ensure that the replacements will be loyal to his leadership.

Since 2012, Xi has used the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection to carry out an unprecedented crackdown that has terminated the careers of more than 150 officials, military officers and state-sector business executives with the rank of vice-president or higher. In the past six months, more than a dozen provincial party chiefs have been replaced by party officials regarded as being close to Xi.

The anti-corruption purge and calls for party discipline have focused on stemming any criticism of the top CCP leaders, especially Xi himself, who is increasingly being referred to as the "core" of the party leadership.

The *New York Times* reported that the Ministry of Public Security was not exempt from inspection. "Hundreds of officers were marched into a cavernous auditorium to listen to investigators excoriate senior ministry officials for lacking 'political judgment' and demand greater loyalty to Mr. Xi and the party," it stated. Minister of Public Security Guo Shengkun responded by vowing that his officers would be "even more steadfastly and conscientiously" obedient to Xi and other party leaders.

The head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, Wang Qishan, is a loyal ally of Xi and has been central to Xi's purge of the CCP bureaucracy, leading to speculation that Xi might seek to retain him in his post and on the Politburo Standing Committee.

During his four years in office, Xi has steadily consolidated his personal hold over the military and state apparatus. His military reform program not only

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puts greater focus on the navy and air force at the expense of the army but also consolidates the administrative structures under the Central Military Commission chaired by Xi. The president has also established a number of Leading Small Groups under his control that enable him to direct policy across a range of key issues, including the economy and foreign affairs.

Xi and Li have already publicly disagreed on economic policy. The premier, who is nominally in charge of the economy, is an advocate of reducing obstacles to further foreign investment in line with the demands of the IMF and World Bank. In July, Li's prepared comments to the State Council stressed the need to "slim down" state-owned enterprises and make them "follow market rules." In his remarks to the same meeting, Xi called for "stronger, better, bigger" state corporations with a central management role for the CCP.

In early August, the CCP announced a major reorganisation of the Communist Youth League, halving its budget and slashing its personnel. The league is the base for one of the main factions of the CCP leadership including Li. According to a Reuters report last month, Xi is determined to curb the influence of the Youth League faction in the lead-up to next year's congress and leadership changes, including its numbers on the Politburo Standing Committee. The reorganisation was accompanied by a campaign in the state media branding the organisation as "elitist and inefficient."

Xi's efforts to strengthen his control over the top party leadership is also driven by fears of rising social tensions fueled by a slowing economy that has already led to plans to shed millions of jobs in so-called state-owned zombie companies—enterprises that are being kept afloat by state bank loans. The number of strikes as tabulated by the Hong Kong-based China Labour Bulletin has risen dramatically over the past year. Divisions in the CCP leadership always have the potential to open the way for a mass movement from below.

The current plenum also takes place amid the uncertainty being generated by the US presidential elections. Xi's response to the Obama administration's confrontational "pivot" has been to boost the Chinese military while at the same time trying to reach an accommodation with Washington. Any easing of US-China tensions is unlikely whether Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump wins the election.

The plenum this week is the prelude to intense factional manoeuvring in the lead-up to next year's congress. Following the meeting, the process for the selection of around 2,300 delegates to the congress will begin. The plenum itself could take an informal straw poll as a gauge of the support for various figures vying for positions on the top party bodies.

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