

Factional infighting sharpens in China

Mr Xi will seek to rule even after 2022 but whether other factions will allow him to continue to decimate their ranks remains to be seen

Since August 3, China's top leaders have been meeting in the seaside town of Beidaihe to clear the decks for the important 19th Congress of the ruling Communist Party, which may be convened in November this year. The annual Beidaihe meetings are not formal gatherings like the party plenum nor are their proceedings publicly acknowledged or announced. The current leaders are usually joined by veterans who may no longer be in office but still retain significant influence due to their seniority and experience. Their presence lends support to their protégés, who may be jockeying for high office. These gatherings are both about personnel as well as policies. A leader accumulates power and authority through the patronage network that he commands within the Party. This leads to endemic factionalism within the Party which may sometimes turn vicious and even brutal.

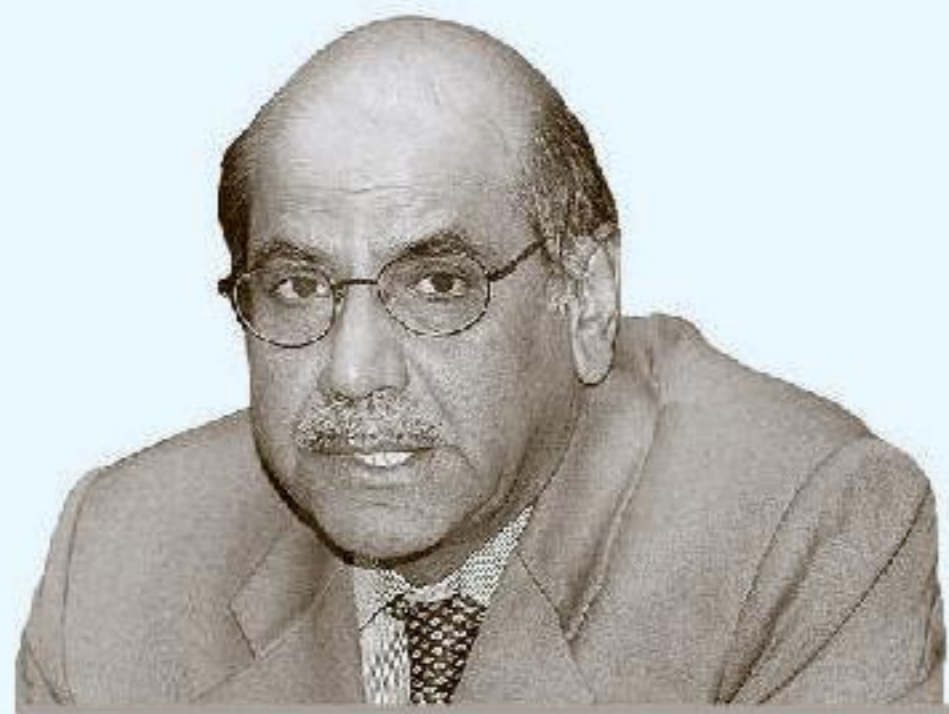
The Beidaihe meeting is particularly significant because key leadership positions will be up for grabs at the forthcoming Party Congress. There is an informal rule that central leaders will retire at 67 and that the Party General Secretary and the President would not hold office beyond two five-year terms. The top Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, and Premier Li Keqiang will, therefore, continue in office for another term until the next Party Congress. However, in the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee (PBC), the highest organ of Party rule, there are five members who will retire and

must therefore be replaced. One of them is Wang Qishan, who is head of the powerful Central Discipline and Inspection Commission, spearheading the ongoing anti-corruption campaign. The campaign has proved to be a most powerful weapon to remove potential rivals and opponents within the Party and Mr Xi has given every indication that he intends to continue

with it. Party rules could be bent to retain Mr Wang in this position or else he may replace Mr Li as Premier, while the latter may be moved to a largely ceremonial post of President of the National People's Congress, China's parliament. Mr Xi will certainly wish to put as many of his nominees in the PBC as may be possible. If he succeeds that will reflect as well as further consolidate the dominant position he has already achieved in the Party. This will reverse the trend we have seen since

the end of the Mao era to move towards a more decentralised and collective form of leadership with predictable and relatively smooth power transitions.

According to Party norms, Mr Xi and Mr Li would stay in office till 2022. Their probable successors, it was being reported, were Sun Zhengcai, until recently Party chief in Chongqing (he had replaced the disgraced Bo Xilai), and Hu Chunhua, the Party chief in the key province of Guangdong. Both are members of the Politburo and it was anticipated that they would be elevated to the PBC, indicating their anointment as the likely successors to the current top leaders. But in a



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replay of what happened to Mr Bo on the eve of the 18th Party Congress, Mr Sun was purged from office last month, accused of "serious discipline violations" and for not having done enough to remove the "poison" spread by Mr Bo in Chongqing. It remains to be seen if Mr Hu survives.

There are three major factions in the Party. There is the powerful princeling faction or the descendants of the first generation revolutionaries, to which Mr Xi belongs. His father was a respected revolutionary leader Xi Zhongcun. The princelings who call themselves the "second Red generation" are grouped in various associations but the most powerful is the Yanan Children's Friendship Association headed by Hu Muying, the son of Hu Qiaomu, a former secretary to Mao. Another influential faction is the "Tuan pai" or leaders who have emerged through the Communist Youth League ranks. Hu Jintao and Mr Li belong to this faction. The Shanghai faction whose most prominent representative is former President Jiang Zemin is the third important faction and Mr Sun belongs to it ranks. In consolidating his position and that of his own patronage network, Mr Xi has cut the Communist Youth League down to size by halving its budget last year and calling for an overhaul of its leadership. The removal of Mr Sun may be a sign that the Jiang Zemin faction is also being targeted.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is an important political player and the three factions are also represented in its leadership ranks. On July 30, Mr Xi reviewed PLA troops on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the PLA at a massive parade held, not in Beijing but in remote Zhurihe, a training base, in Inner Mongolia. He did not share the honours with any other senior leader thus demonstrating the personal allegiance owed to him by the PLA. This, too, hints at an attempt to cement his undisputed and "core leadership" at the forthcoming Party Congress. If no successor echelon of top leaders emerges at the Congress then it is a safe bet that Mr Xi will seek to continue to rule even after 2022. Whether other factions will allow him to continue to decimate their ranks and install a princeling ruling oligarchy remains to be seen.

It was at a similar Beidaihe Conference in August 1962 that the fateful decision was taken by Mao to launch a major border war "to teach India a lesson". The decision was also linked to Mao's effort to reassert his authority after being consigned to the second line of leadership in the wake of the catastrophic failure of the Great Leap Forward and the setting up of people's communes. One should be alert on how the Doklam incident plays into the factional infighting that will inevitably sharpen as the countdown to the Party Congress begins. Mr Xi is unlikely to open himself to the charge of tolerating a threat to Chinese territorial integrity, as the stand-off at Doklam has been described. This enhances the risk of escalation and India needs to be prepared to deal with it.

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