

18th Party Congress and the Future

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After a lot of debate, discussion and confusion, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has finally set the date for the 18th Party Congress, to be held on November 8, 2012. At this Congress there will be change in Chinese leadership, from the fourth generation of leaders (Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao) to the fifth generation of leaders (Xi Jinping and Le Keqiang). If this convenes peacefully, it will be only the second time in history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that a peaceful transfer of power takes place. With the backdrop of the Party Congress, this year holds a number of questions regarding the future course of the CCP and only time will tell which direction it will take. There is a need to analyze the situation as over the years the CCP has also transformed greatly. According to *China Daily*, since its formation the CCP has grown in numbers. From a total of 50 members the number of members of CCP today is 82 million, which is equivalent to the population of Germany.

The build up to the Party Congress has brought a number of issues to the forefront which the CCP needs to address at the earliest. Beijing needs to understand that there has been a major transformation in positioning of the CCP. The world at large is interested in the Party Congress and its outcome, like never before and what the next generation of leadership says will be watched very closely. China today is the second largest economy in the world and has major global interests. The last financial crisis highlighted the fact that Chinese economy is highly interlinked with the global economy and Beijing plays a very crucial role in deciding the direction of the world economy. Thus the world is curious to understand the direction which the Chinese leadership will propagate and adopt.

The Party Congress has also intensified the international focus on the domestic situation in China. However the last few months have shown that the steps undertaken by Beijing to address its domestic challenges have not been very effective or conducive. The most prominent example of this is the week when Xi Jinping went out of public eyes. As is the case with China, it followed a complete media blackout on the issue resulting in a number of speculation and rumours. The most prominent discussion was based on the fact that there is a major tussle within the CCP. The 'right' way to control and handle this development would have been to provide the media and the international community with some information. Beijing's policy of 'no information equals to good information' does not always work in its favour. It needs to seriously consider ways to disperse information.

With the reform and opening up of the Chinese economy, the Chinese media has undergone major transformation. However the same has not been true about the political sphere. The CCP still follows the mindset of controlling the media. Today, with a boom in information technologies, internet and cell phones, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the CCP to control the flow of information. A similar situation was seen with respect to non-declaration of date for the Party Congress. The more the CCP delayed this, the more speculations took place. Primary debate surrounded the fact that the CCP is struggling to pacify the factions within it. A more open approach would have helped ease the growing confusion.

The rise in the internet has made the task of the CCP tougher. In the last few years it has been seen that the internet is becoming difficult to control. In a move to get the media involved the CCP has announced that it will be inviting media people (domestic as well as international) to cover the Party Congress. They have been asked to submit applications between October 9 and November 2, the *China Daily* reported.

With changed times there is a need for the CCP to be more aware of the role of media and try and understand that the media is trying to move away from being the 'mouthpiece' of the party. Though it has not succeeded fully in achieving this, it is working towards becoming a watchdog of the people. The media wants to be freer and work as the bridge between the Party and the people. In the last decade it was successfully managed to do this on a number of occasions. The attempt by the CCP to continue to control the media is increasing the friction between the Party and the media.

How the CCP will address these issues only time will tell, but one cannot deny that these changes and transformations are crucial for the CCP's future and, one which will also affect the path which China undertakes.