

Session Title: What would win the new leadership the "Mandate of Heaven"?

Panelists:

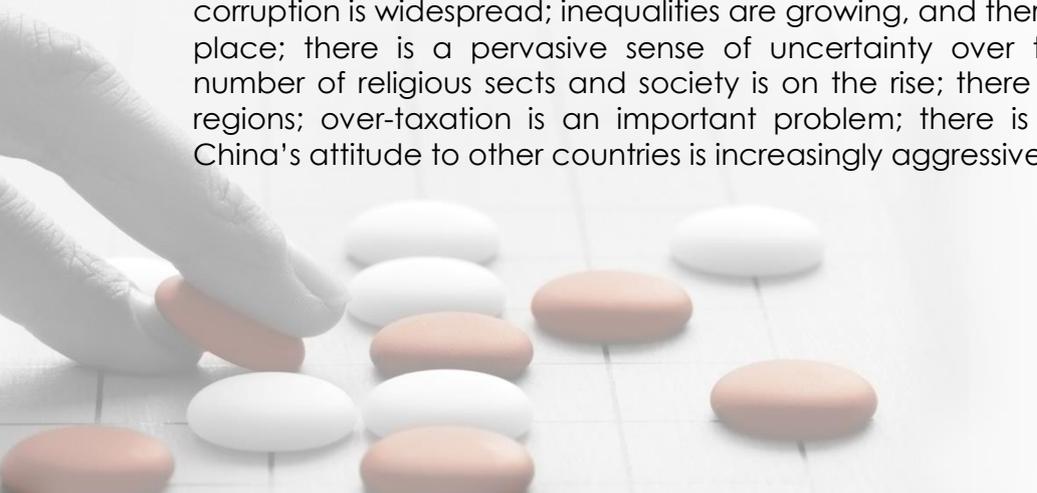
- **BO Zhiyue** 薄智跃, Senior Research Fellow, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore
- **PEI Minxin** 裴敏欣, Director, Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies, Claremont McKenna College, United States of America
- **David SHAMBAUGH** 沈大伟, Director, China Policy Program, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, United States of America
- **WANG Zhengxu** 王正绪, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, China Policy Institute, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

Moderator: WOO Keng Choong 胡敬中, Deputy Chief Editor, Chinese Current Affairs, MediaCorp Private Limited, Singapore

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been striving to reinforce its legitimacy through economic performance, nationalism, ideology, culture, governance and democracy. With important changes in Chinese society and prospects of comparatively slower economic growth, corruption, socio-economic inequalities and ecological problems will likely undermine public confidence and raise questions about the State's mandate to rule over Chinese society.

Pei Minxin stressed that the CCP pays close attention issues affecting its legitimacy. The problem of democratization has resurfaced and prompted the political elite to take a stand on possible political reforms. The new leadership attempted to position itself as a defender of the people's interests in foreign relations and by actively trying to curb corruption. Yet, the efficiency of these efforts may be questioned since they have failed to convince the public and did not modify the way government is perceived. While public faith in Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" remains insufficient, Pei Minxin stressed that the fifth generation of leadership has been quite proactive in attempting to address problems of legitimacy.

According to David Shambaugh, China is now in a state of atrophy. He pointed to several indications of that political legitimacy is lacking in the country: Chinese society feigns compliance with the CCP's "hollow ideology"; factionalism is widespread among the political elite; leadership is more isolated than it appears; corruption is widespread; inequalities are growing, and there is no social safety net in place; there is a pervasive sense of uncertainty over the country's future; the number of religious sects and society is on the rise; there is social unrest in several regions; over-taxation is an important problem; there is no real rule-of-law, and China's attitude to other countries is increasingly aggressive.



Bo Zhiyue also pointed out that while the CCP has gained “performance legitimacy” thanks to the country’s economic growth, the people would still contest the party if it fails to continue to improve people’s welfare. Bo Zhiyue thinks political reforms were ruled out during the 18th Congress, and that maintaining the Leninist model is on the agenda.

In response to Claude Smadja’s question on maintaining political legitimacy in the digital age (specifically, how the CCP has adapted to the proliferation of social media and responding to public opinion), the speakers felt that while social media may indeed be opening up more social spaces is providing horizontal linkages across diverse regions on the mainland, the CCP has nonetheless adopted tactical measures by selecting and emphasizing certain social phenomena while downplaying or ignoring others. As a further illustration of how the reach of the State has permeated mainstream Internet usage, Wang also alluded to the central government’s wide assortment of Internet tools in controlling the flow of information as well as regulate its content when he mentioned that some notable Weibo accounts that have depicted the government negatively have also been deleted. Such being the case, it is generally felt that the party-state is not responding to social media. Regardless of these, however, Shambaugh – citing the examples of Egypt and Falungong – nevertheless expressed belief in the potential of social media to mobilize the Chinese masses. Much remains to be seen if Chinese societal elements should continue to hold on to hopes of challenging the CCP’s political legitimacy via social media.

