



ORGANISATION FOR RESEARCH ON
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BEIDAIHE MEETING

Backgrounder 01



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Summary

- Top CCP leaders and other experts gather at the coastal resort town of Beidaihe under the guise of a summer break, whereas in reality, major political considerations take place in informal settings.
- While President Xi Jinping's rule has decreased the significance of Beidaihe, it is still a crucial forum for debate and deliberation over key state policies.
- The Beidaihe meetings are shrouded in mystery and it receives little to no official media coverage.

Introduction

In late June 2022, it was reported that Tesla cars would be prohibited from entering the Chinese coastal resort town Beidaihe for at least two months beginning from the 1st of July, 2022. The local traffic official cited "national affairs" concerns as the reason behind this move. This can be viewed in terms of a notable increase in security before the Beidaihe retreat, a secretive annual gathering of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders.

Beidaihe, a town on northeast China's Bohai Sea, is where top Chinese political leaders seemingly go for a summer break. However, when looked at closely, this "leisure gathering" is actually where key political considerations occur in informal settings. After Xi Jinping's Hong Kong visit on July 1st, 2022, China watchers redirected their attention to Beidaihe and the upcoming summit that will take place in late July or early August. The upcoming National Party Congress in November also makes this year's meeting increasingly important.

How did the Beidaihe Meetings begin?

Beidaihe, situated in Qinhuangdao, Hebei province, was previously known as China's "summer capital". As the summer capital, Beidaihe has always been politically influential, as many major political decisions have been made here. The top CCP leaders and officials meet in secret and carve out policies to be

rubber-stamped by the National People's Congress later in public.

The Qing government was the first to use Beidaihe as a summer retreat to indulge foreign diplomats in the late 19th century. Nonetheless, Beidaihe has served as the nerve centre of Chinese politics during the summer since the early fifties, ever since Mao Zedong introduced his "summer office system" by shifting the governmental decision-making apparatus to the resort. Mao Zedong began this tradition of having senior officials come together for a summer retreat and meet unofficially. Beidaihe was Mao's approach to escaping the summer heat, while simultaneously "sowing discord between various factions, playing one group of provocateurs off another to deplete them both", according to Pin Ho, the founder of Mingjing Media Group.

Almost all the important conferences of the CCP Central Committee (CCPCC) were called to order in Beidaihe between 1953 and 1965. These summer retreats at Beidaihe were halted when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and resumed in 1984. The conferences were once again suspended by Hu Jintao in 2003, who wished to project a prudent image of the CCP and preferred working through formal state and party channels. Upon achieving power, Xi Jinping reinvigorated the Beidaihe tradition in 2012, as he restored the tradition of summer retreats.

What happens at Beidaihe?

An American diplomat once termed Beidaihe as "China's smoke-filled room".

The unique role of the Beidaihe meetings in its provision of a "forum for consultations, exchanges, explorations and communications" on crucial matters concerning state politics, policies and personnel is irreplaceable. It provides a private and heavily guarded space for both present and past CCP leaders to voice their opinions and political differences on national-level policies in place. Those opinions are often absorbed into the formal policy-making meetings that commence later in Beijing.

The beginnings of several major policies can be traced back to Beidaihe. For example, Mao's decision to launch the Great Leap Forward, alternatively China's second Five-Year Plan (1958-1962) and the 1958 People's Liberation Army's (PLA) firing of artillery at the Kinmen Islands both find their origins in the Beidaihe meeting. Deng Xiaoping's "Stern Blows" anti-crime campaign of 1983-1986 was also a decision that came out of Beidaihe. In 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping chaired a Politburo meeting outlining a development strategy until 2035 which was assumed to have been discussed in the Beidaihe meeting held later in the year.

While formal meetings are now a thing of the past, informal exchanges occur at the retreat. The meetings gravitate towards discussions on topics such as the policies in place and important appointments within the Party. In the retreat, efforts are made to coordinate stances and ideas and remove differences in opinion privately to not affect Party unity in formal settings. Senior Party officials have, in their memoirs, recalled that the meetings provided a space for real debate to take place to shape policies. Wu Jiayang, a former Party official and aide to Hu Yaobang stated that "Beidaihe was most popular among the old cadres because it is not always easy for them to participate in decision making in Beijing".



Mao Zedong at Beidaihe in 1960 (Source: Xinhua)

These sessions have become a useful platform for lobbying—younger Party officials hustle to consolidate their positions within the CCP, Party elders appraise current policies, new political alignments are brokered

and present CCP leaders set the tone for China's political outlook. According to Li Cheng, the Politburo (PB), Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) and the CCPC candidates for the 18th National Party Congress (NPC) were shortlisted and finalised at Beidaihe. Back in 2021, there was speculation that discussions would be held about who would fill in Li Keqiang's position after he retires, and over President Xi Jinping's plans for top appointments going into his expected third term.

Deliberations in the retreat tend to be frank and combative. Beidaihe has often provided scope for sharp criticisms of a leader's decisions on a range of matters concerning the state. For instance, media reports have suggested that the Beidaihe meetings can make the paramount leader, Xi Jinping nervous, as his leadership comes under scrutiny by CCP elders who weigh in on current affairs. The informality of the Beidaihe retreat historically favoured retired political elites by giving them more elbow room to voice their concerns about key policies. Nonetheless, Xi's unrelenting campaign against political interference has tempered the influence of retired leaders at these meetings.

What's the contemporary significance of Beidaihe?

After Xi reinstated the Beidaihe tradition, before the 18th NPC, the nature and characteristics of the retreat changed significantly. Telling signs of the Beidaihe meetings such as the customary meet and greets between the top leaders and industry experts have disappeared. Party leadership also seems to have reached a consensus over major future policies under Xi's guidance. Given Xi's consolidation of power and authority, analysts suggest that the significance of the Beidaihe meetings has decreased.

While there are not any major challenge to Xi's strongman leadership and his control over policymaking in China, Beidaihe still provides a crucial space for critiquing and reviewing top decision-making. Xi can use this platform to build consensus among CCP leaders on how to navigate pressing concerns and the way forward for Chinese politics.

China watchers regard the Beidaihe conclave as a significant precursor to the NPC which has traditionally been held in the months of October and November. With the 20th NPC right around the corner and growing dissension over some of Xi's policies and initiatives, this year's meeting will be closely monitored.

Before the retreat takes place, observers notice a visible elevation in security measures in Beidaihe and Qinhuangdao. This is done to ensure enough precautions are taken to provide a safe and secure setting for the gathering to take place. Besides these annual summer sessions, leaders meet frequently at Beidaihe to hold weekly gatherings of the members of the PBSC and monthly PB meetings wherein they discuss the functioning of other party, government and military establishments.

Speculation on Beidaihe

These annual breaks wherein top Chinese political leaders gather to both escape the summer heat and converse have become the most watched unofficial event in China's political calendar. Traditionally, there is no official announcement made about the summer retreat. Instead, whenever Party leaders and PB members have not made public appearances in a while, it is assumed that it is Beidaihe time. For instance, in August 2021, Xi Jinping wrote a reply letter to foreign participants at the Global Young Leaders Dialogue (GYLD) and it was assumed that he was in Beidaihe since no public appearance had been made since the 1st of August.

Chinese official media outlets tend to play down the Beidaihe summer conclave, adding to the retreat's mysterious aura. Official media outlets often include news which incidentally confirms an informal gathering taking place in Beidaihe between senior Party leaders and industry experts. No media or outsiders are allowed while the 15-day retreat of top CCP leaders takes place. Despite the low publicity and growing questions over the significance of the Beidaihe meetings, it remains one of the most important events to examine and assess Chinese politics. International

media focus remains hawk-eyed in case of any development whatsoever, considering how domestic Beijing's politics have global consequences. Media outside China have to follow a trail of breadcrumbs left by the state media and piece the story together by themselves, although the real picture is always left up for speculation.

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