

POLITBURO STANDING COMMITTEE

MEET CHINA'S NEW RULING LINE-UP

President Xi Jinping has unveiled a new lineup for China's all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), the ruling Communists' top decision-making body in a one-party political system. Here are the seven men (in order of their party seniority) who will rule 1.4 billion people for the next five years.

XI JINPING

Since Xi Jinping, 64, took over the party at its 18th National Congress in 2012, he has increasingly tightened his grip over the vast country, chairing numerous super-commissions that he created to take charge of both domestic and foreign policies. Already hailed as the most powerful -- and headline -- Chinese leader in decades, Xi's re-election as the party's head, coupled with the fact that no apparent successors were named in the new PBSC, point to the growing possibility of him staying on beyond 2022.



LI KEQIANG

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has seen his political fortune fall -- and then rebound under Xi. China's No 2 leader, who runs the day-to-day operations of the government, is technically in charge of the world's second-largest economy but has long been overshadowed by his dominant and omnipresent boss. A trained economist, Li, 62, is often considered a reformer. He is all-but-certain to retain of his post.



LIZHANSHU

Xi's right-hand man Li Zhanshu has occupied a position that's often compared to the White House chief of staff. His new-gained No 3 spot in the party hierarchy makes him the likely next chairman of China's rubber-stamp parliament, according to political tradition. After serving several major provincial posts, including party chief in Guizhou province, Li, 67, was handpicked by Xi to run his offices shortly before the Chinese leader took power in late 2012.



WANGYANG

Wang Yang, the Chinese vice premier who is likely to head the country's top political advisory body soon, is often seen as a reform-minded straight shooter. Wang, 62, rose through the ranks quickly in the Hu Jintao era to become the top official in Chongqing and then Guangdong, China's manufacturing heartland. Since joining the cabinet, Wang has presided over several rounds Sino-US talks on sticky economic and trade issues.



WANGHUNING

Wang Huning's political longevity is seen as a testament to his indispensable role as the so-called chief strategist of Zhongnanhai, the heavily guarded Chinese leadership compound in central Beijing that's China's equivalent of the White House. Having served under three presidents (Jiang, Hu and now Xi), this professor turned politician is known for his talent in turning a Chinese leader's ideas into methodical thoughts and theories.



ZHAOLEJI

Zhao Leji, a previously under-the-radar politician, will wield outsized power in the party as he inherits one of the most powerful roles in Chinese politics. He has officially taken over the party's fearsome anti-corruption arm, responsible for cracking down on graft in the party -- an issue that has become a lightning rod for public discontent and a top priority for Xi in the past five years.



HANZHENG

Shanghai party chief Han Zheng is the ultimate survivor in Chinese politics, having served under multiple bosses from rival factions, including Xi himself. Born and raised in China's largest city, Han, 63, was a longtime Shanghai mayor who has largely focused his career on growing the city's economy and restoring its former glory as a global financial center. Occasionally mentioned as a potential premier, Han is now likely to serve as Li Keqiang's top lieutenant instead.



SOURCE: AFP

India defends N Korea, Iran ties

US top diplomat says militants a threat to Pakistan govt, region

AGENCIES

India's foreign minister yesterday defended the country's ties with North Korea and Iran during talks with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson aimed at building robust relations between the two giant democracies.

Tillerson, who flew in from Pakistan which he called an important US ally in the restive region, said the United States is concerned that extremist groups are threatening the "stability and security" of the Pakistan government.

"Quite frankly my view - and I expressed this to the leadership of Pakistan - is we also are concerned about the stability and security of Pakistan's government as well."

"Terrorist safe havens will not be tolerated," Tillerson said. Pakistan says it is doing all it can to fight the militants.

The Trump administration has launched

a new US effort to deepen military and economic ties with India as a way to balance China's assertive posture across Asia.

security throughout the region," Tillerson told a joint news conference with Swaraj. But the talks also touched on India's



US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson listens to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Prime Minister's residence in New Delhi, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

TILLERSON IN INDIA

Eying china, US seeks dramatic expansion in ties with India

Washington accepts New Delhi's emergence as a leading power

At the talks with Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, both sides pledged to strengthen anti-terrorism cooperation and Tillerson said Washington stood ready to provide India with advanced military technology.

"The United States supports India's emergence as a leading power and will continue to contribute to Indian capabilities to provide

diplomatic ties with North Korea. Swaraj said she told the top US diplomat that some level of diplomatic presence was necessary to keep open channels of communication.

India and North Korea maintain diplomatic offices in each other's capitals, though New Delhi recently banned trade of most goods with the country, except food and

Kurds offer to suspend referendum results

Urges ceasefire as Iraq hints military ops to continue

REUTERS, Baghdad

Kurdish authorities in Iraq yesterday offered to put an independence drive on hold, stepping up efforts to resolve a crisis in relations with Baghdad via dialogue rather than military means.

But a Iraqi military spokesman suggested an offensive -- launched to wrest back territory after Kurds voted overwhelmingly for independence in a disputed referendum in September -- would continue regardless.

The Iraqi government has transformed the balance of power in the north of the country since launching its campaign last week against the Kurds, who govern an autonomous region of three northern provinces.

"The fighting between the two sides will not produce a victory for any, it will take the country to total destruction," said the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in a statement. The KRG proposed an immediate

ceasefire, a suspension of the referendum result, and "starting an open dialogue with the federal government based on the Iraqi Constitution".

Baghdad declared the referendum illegal and responded by seizing back the city of Kirkuk, the oil-producing areas around it and other territory that the Kurds had captured from militant group Islamic State.

In a brief social media comment hinting that the campaign would continue, an Iraqi military spokesman said: "Military operations are not connected to politics."

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has said the KRG should cancel the vote's outcome as a pre-condition for talks.

He had yet to react to the Kurdish proposal yesterday, when he began an official visit to neighbouring Turkey and Iran during which relations with the Kurds -- whose communities are established in parts of all three countries as well as Syria -- will be high on the agenda.

PM Abadi yet to react to Kurdish proposal
Iran reopens border crossing with Kurdistan

EAST JERUSALEM SETTLEMENT

Israel approves 176 new settler homes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli authorities yesterday approved a major expansion of an east Jerusalem settlement, signing off on plans to add 176 homes, the city's deputy mayor said.

The latest approvals come after Israel last week advanced plans for more than 2,600 settlement homes in various areas of the occupied West Bank.

The expansion approved yesterday would create the largest Israeli settlement inside a Palestinian neighbourhood of the city, NGOs say.

It will allow the Nof Zion settlement to add 176 housing units to the 91 existing homes. The settlement is located in the annexed east Jerusalem Palestinian neighbourhood of Jabel Mukaber. The plans were approved by a Jerusalem planning committee, Deputy Mayor Meir Turjeman told AFP.

However, the property remains the subject of an ongoing ownership dispute between two different firms and the court case must be resolved before construction can move ahead, a spokeswoman for the Peace Now settlement watchdog told AFP.

The approvals were granted but made conditional upon the case being resolved. Peace Now and other NGOs say the approvals would make Nof Zion the largest Israeli settlement inside any Palestinian neighbourhood of east Jerusalem and possibly also of the West Bank.



George HW Bush groped actress: reports

AFP, Washington

"Former US President George HW Bush has issued an apology to an actress who accused him of groping her from his wheelchair while attending a screening, according to reports.

Heather Lind, 34, said the incident occurred four years ago at an event to promote the TV series "Turn: Washington's Spies," according to the Daily Mail, which saved a screenshot of a lengthy Instagram post she wrote and later deleted.

Lind added she decided to share her story after seeing Bush Sr, 93, appear onstage at a benefit concert to raise money for victims of the hurricane-ravaged southern United States and Caribbean.

"I found it disturbing because I recognize the respect ex-presidents are given for having served," she wrote.

"But when I got the chance to meet George H. W. Bush four years ago to promote a historical television show I was working on, he sexually assaulted me while I was posing for a similar photo.

"He didn't shake my hand. He touched me from behind from his wheelchair with his wife Barbara Bush by his side. He told me a dirty joke," she added.

Later on, as pictures were being taken, Bush repeated the act, while "Barbara rolled her eyes as if to say 'not again.'"

In a statement circulated to the Daily Mail and the New York Daily News, a spokesman for Bush did not deny the allegation but said it was an ill-judged attempt at humor.

NEWS IN brief

Malware attack hits European targets

AFP, Moscow

A malware attack that hit a Ukrainian international airport and Russian media outlets had almost 200 other targets in those countries and other European states, an internet security firm said yesterday. The "BadRabbit" malware that struck on Tuesday appeared to be the largest since "NotPetya" was launched from the same two countries before affecting the rest of the world in July.

Protests as Kenya to hold polls today

REUTERS, Nairobi

Kenya's repeat presidential elections will proceed as planned today, said the head of the election board yesterday, after a tumultuous day in which a no-show by most Supreme Court judges prevented the hearing of a petition to delay the poll. Within minutes of the announcement, hundreds of supporters of opposition leader Raila Odinga took to the streets of Kisumu, his main stronghold. Clashes were reported.

Gujarat state polls in December

AFP, New Delhi

Voters in Narendra Modi's home state Gujarat will go to the polls in December, the election commission announced yesterday. BJP has ruled the western state for more than two decades, and a win there would further cement Modi's prospects of securing a second term at general elections in 2019. Nearly 43 million voters in Gujarat will cast ballots to elect 182 lawmakers, with the results announced on December 18.

WORLD'S MOST POWERFUL PASSPORT

Tiny Singapore tops the list

AFP, Singapore

Tiny Singapore now has the world's most powerful passport, according to a new ranking, with its citizens able to travel to the greatest number of countries visa free.

Passport Index, which keeps track of how useable such documents are, said the city-state grabbed the top spot after Paraguay removed restrictions for Singaporeans.

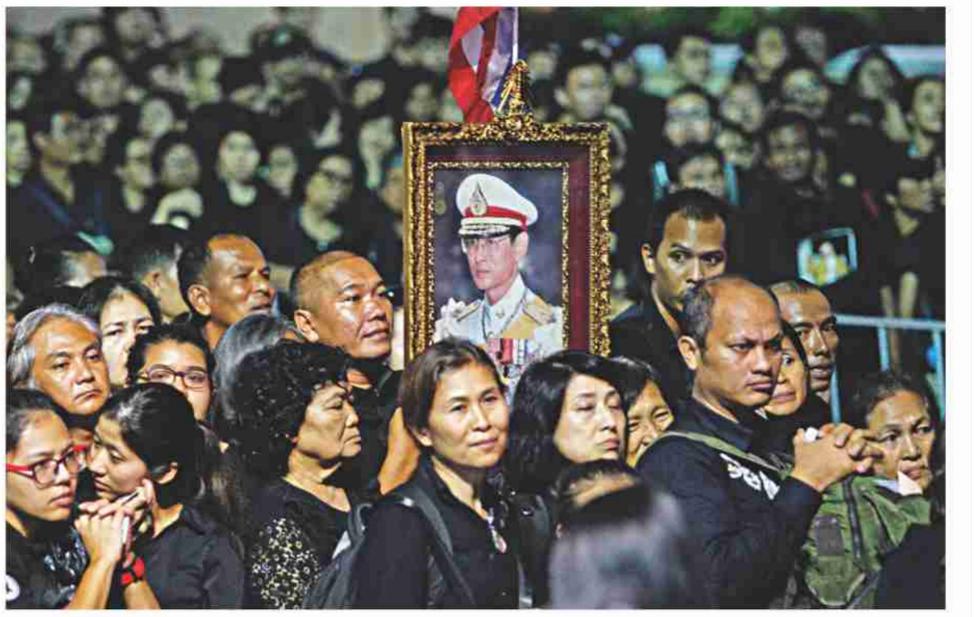
That means the approximately 5.6 million holders of Singaporean passports can now travel to 159 countries either without a visa at all, or can have one issued on arrival.

Germany came in second place, with its citizens able to visit 158 countries without a visa, while Sweden and South Korea tied for third.

The US passport was in sixth place, alongside Malaysia, Ireland and Canada. Afghanistan came bottom of the list with visa-free access to just 22 countries.

Passport Index said the US passport's usefulness has fallen since President Donald Trump took office, with Turkey and the Central African Republic becoming the most recent countries to revoke their visa-free entry for holders.

Passport Index ranks passports worldwide based on the cross-border access a holder has. It was developed by Canada-based global consultancy Arton Capital.



Mourners queue as they attend the Royal Cremation ceremony of Thailand's late King Bhumibol Adulyadej near the Grand Palace in Bangkok, yesterday. Thailand yesterday marked the start of a lavish, five-day funeral for the late king with a Buddhist religious ceremony attended by senior members of its royal family. PHOTO: REUTERS

Catalan cracks appear

Separatists divided on how to deal with Madrid pressure

AFP, Barcelona

Pro-independence activists prepared to take to the streets of Catalonia yesterday as cracks appeared between separatist regional leaders over how best to avoid an impending power takeover by Spain.

In a bid to hold Madrid at arm's length, several members of Carles Puigdemont's executive have urged him to call elections for a new regional government, a source close to the Catalan leader told AFP.

Other allies, however, are pressuring Puigdemont to follow through on his threat to unilaterally break away from the semi-autonomous region that accounts for 16 percent of Spain's population and 20 percent of its economic output.

Civic groups, too, piled on the pressure, organising a march on the regional parliament yesterday evening to press for an independent Catalan republic. The region of 7.5 million people is

fiercely protective of its language and culture and has long struggled for self-determination.

Its inhabitants, however, are deeply divided on independence from Spain.

The country's deepest political crisis in decades was sparked by a "Yes" vote in a banned October 1 independence referendum.

Catalan leaders say 90 percent of participants voted for independence, though only 43 percent of voters -- some 2.3 million -- turned out in a plebiscite that did not meet electoral standards.

Many anti-secessionists stayed away.

Only two days remain before the central government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy strips Puigdemont and his executive of all political power under Article 155 of the constitution devised to rein in rebel regions.

This central administration would last for up to six months, until elections are called and a new Catalan parliament sworn in.



Trump faces GOP rebellion

Two Republican senators accuse US president of debasing politics and country's standing abroad; White House dismisses criticism

REUTERS, Washington

Tensions among Republicans about President Donald Trump boiled over on Tuesday as two senators accused Trump of debasing US politics and the country's standing abroad, a rebellion that could portend trouble for his legislative agenda.

The extraordinary public criticism of the president from Jeff Flake and Bob Corker further strained what had already been a fraught relationship between Trump and fellow Republicans as they try to enact tax reform and other policy items.

In an emotional speech on the Senate floor, Flake repeatedly targeted Trump's style of governing, saying American politics had become "inured" to "reckless, outrageous and undignified" behaviour from the White House.

"The instinct to scapegoat and belittle threatens to turn us into a

fearful, backward-looking people," said the Arizona lawmaker, who announced he would not run for re-election next year.

"I will not be complicit or silent," Flake said.

Trump, via Twitter, has been unrelent-

effectively freed himself up to speak his mind, without having one eye on voter reactions in his home state.

Corker, who has also said he is not running for re-election in Tennessee, accused Trump of telling falsehoods that could be easily proven wrong and willfully damaging the country's standing in the world, eviscerating the president with comments that stirred deepening divisions in the Republican Party.

"You would think he would aspire to be the president of the United States and act like a president of the United States, but that's not going to be the case apparently," Corker told reporters. "I've seen no evolution in an upward way. In fact, I would say, he's almost devolved."

White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders dismissed the comments from Flake and Corker and said Trump wanted senators who could make



ing in his criticism of Corker and Flake, accusing them of supporting Democratic priorities, and using sometimes slashing language, such as his dismissal of Corker as "liddle Bob Corker."

By announcing he will be leaving when his term ends in early 2019, Flake