President of China, Xi Jinping, classifies contemporary Chinese history into two 30-year periods - before and after Deng Xiaoping's unleashing market reforms at the end of the 1970s. Does this mean that he sees his reign as a demarcation for a new 30-year period? Where is China heading after President Xi consolidates power domestically through establishing and heading a number of committees by himself? Professor Joseph Fewsmith of international relations and political science at Boston University, Professor Margaret Y. K. Woo of the School of Law at Northeastern University and Professor Robert Ross of political science at Boston College together decipher the recent 4th Plenum of the Communist Party for the public from the perspective of China's domestic politics, legal development and foreign policy respectively.

Fewsmith views many of the party's policy initiatives in the context of a chaotic situation. China's rampant corruption, murky rules and regulations, divorce of power and responsibility - all prevalent after rapid economic development for over three decades - compel the party to do something. Fewsmith notices changes from only a decade ago. Village and township elections, which showed some prospect of political opening up, have been abandoned. Political centralization has become the theme of the day. Working groups from the party's Discipline and Inspection Commission (纪检委) and Political and Legal Commission (政法委) have been dispatched directly from Beijing to investigate and combat corruption.

The Development and Reform Commission (发改委) has been hit hard in this campaign, especially the oil sector formerly headed by Zhou Yongkang and the coal sector, centered around Shanxi Province. It is not clear how Wang Qishan, head of the Discipline and Inspection Commission, would carry out the anti-corruption campaign - whom he will go after next, which level or which sector of officials would catch his attention, or who would be left untouched in this sweeping campaign. What is known is his interest in the French Revolution and Alexis de Tocqueville’s works, indicating his full awareness of the danger of reforms, a double-edged sword in any case. Fewsmith is skeptical about the ability of a system to clean itself with so much and so many vested interests and obstacles.
Woo concurs with Fewsmith that the reason that the CCP now addresses explicitly rule of law is to bring order out of chaos. She highlights some characteristics of rule of law in China, different from the western understanding of this concept. In the West, laws are derived either from natural principles or from democratic consensus, thereby are above politics and government. In China, the communist party assesses and guides any change or development of law. While the 4th plenum signifies that law will be taken seriously and party disciplines will be clearer and stricter, it does not fundamentally change the party's superior position above the law. Furthermore, Chinese leaders have a very unapologetic attitude toward their approach to law and their legal reforms. They criticize some university scholars for their excessive emphasis on western approaches and perspectives.

There are some encouraging signs in the 4th plenum. It calls for greater transparency in law making and execution, including more open trials, publishing experts' opinions and greater participation in the judicial decision process. Top Chinese leaders intend to clean up their internal rules and regulations, eliminating redundancies and inconsistencies with increasing regularization and formality. They plan to create a circuit court system, like the U.S., and centralize judges appointments to higher level courts from provincial people's congress in an effort to prevent local influences in the judicial system. They will also establish a new case registration system to take into account those cases which are not accepted by local courts. They intend to expand the role of government prosecutors to take on cases of public interest, such as environmental pollution. The 4th plenum promotes legal education both for leaders as well as the general public. Woo wonders whether these legal reforms of increasing professionalism, transparency and centralization would have substantial consequences in the long run, unintended by the current party leaders, which she calls "take-over effects".

Ross's focus is on Chinese foreign policy and on the question of how to bring about stability from an increasingly unstable Asia. He does not attribute Asia's instability solely to China's wrong doing, but views China's behavior as a response to a political dynamic of a changing world. After World War II, China essentially won almost all wars with its neighboring countries. This macro environment enabled Deng Xiaoping to embark on opening up reforms at the end of the 1970s and a relentless pursuit of economic development ever since. Most of the vacuum space, politically speaking, created by the down fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s has been filled by Chinese influence. China has grown significantly both economically and politically in a largely peaceful world.

But recent developments in the South China Sea, contested between China, Vietnam and the Philippines among others, as well as the East China Sea, contested between China and Japan, are worrisome. No matter how benign Chinese objectives are, the outside world is anxious about China's real intentions with its enhanced military capabilities. China has built an air force and a sizable navy, as well as a heavy coast guard. China can use this power to achieve objectives other than maintaining regional stability,
which had been its only objective prior to its new capabilities. Facing an increasingly powerful China, smaller Asian countries are looking to the U.S. for help. Top Obama administration officials have tried to strengthen relationships with American allies in Asia, which inevitably heightens tensions with China.

Ross does not think that the APEC summit in Beijing earlier this month made any substantive progress in any of the dimensions above. Those agreements achieved at the APEC regarding climate change and information technology are largely symbolic. Looking forward, Ross thinks that the challenge for the U.S. is to re-assure its Asian allies on the one hand, and try not to leave China an impression of U.S. containing China on the other hand; the challenge for China is to be patient, restraining itself from wanting too much too soon.