Joseph Fewsmith addressed the semester’s final session of the Critical Issues seminar series with a discussion of Xi Jinping’s first decisions in office and the challenges the Chinese leader faces in the coming months and years. With strikes at both the left and the right, Xi appears to be attempting to follow in Deng Xiaoping’s footsteps by following a middle path of economic and political reform. Nevertheless, Xi faces significant challenges as he tries to reconcile contradictions inherent in the Chinese political system.

Xi Jinping inherited a divided and fragile political system at the time of his ascension. The leftist critique of reforms, which holds that the party has given up on socialism and socialist values and thereby lost its connection with the people, remains just as powerful as the rightist critique, which promotes greater economic and political reform. These two sides are becoming more and more polarized, leaving many observers to feel as though the middle has eroded in elite Chinese politics. In addition to this polarization, the political system is also increasingly fragile, with corruption and a loss of faith in the communist party. This fragility was on display during one of Xi’s first appearances in public after the leadership transition. As part of his campaign to promote Chinese nationalism, he attended the “Road to Renaissance” exhibit at the Museum of Revolutionary History. This exhibit, which presented China’s recent history as a bitter story of victimization at the hands of the west, shows the deep tensions in Chinese society: China’s leaders should be celebrating their recent successes, not continuing to decry past victimization in order to redirect public anger to an outside source.

Xi has responded to this fragile and divided political system by attempting to restore the middle in Chinese politics and reform. His early trip to Shenzhen, reminiscent of Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour, suggests that Xi intends to adopt Deng’s middle road model of reform. This plan is also illustrated by his recent attacks on the left and the right. The purge of Bo Xilai was a clear strike against the left, while recent crackdowns on dissent and the release of the “qige bujiang” (seven things not to discuss) Document No. 9 were attacks on the right. Finally, Xi’s recent talk at Beidaihe stating the need for reconciling the Maoist and Reform Eras represents another attempt to find the middle again in Chinese politics. This talk, which said that individuals that negate either the Reform Era or the Maoist Era are incorrect, noted that a common thread through these two periods is their commitment to democracy. This vision of democracy is, of course, different from western democracy and is related to the ideas of democratic centralism and the mass line. Building off these ideas, Xi called for once again uniting the party with the people.

The recent Third Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party represents another showing of Xi’s commitment to the centrist path. Important decisions from the plenum include instituting economic reforms that would promote the role of the market in allocating resources; clarifying property rights, particularly important for China’s peasants; lifting hukou restrictions in Chinese cities, except for Beijing and Shanghai; creating a “strong rule of law” and judicial fiscal independence from local governments; implementing reforms of discipline inspection commissions that would make them independent from local party committees, and establishing a state or national security council that would be responsible for domestic affairs. The plenum also called for the establishment of leadership small groups that would be responsible for implementing these reforms; it has recently been announced that Xi Jinping will head both these groups.

In sum, it is remarkable how fast Xi Jinping has moved to consolidate power and implement his vision of the middle road for China’s reforms. Unlike his predecessors who, in the case of Jiang
Zemin, took years to consolidate power or, in the case of Hu Jintao, never really did, Xi has managed to gain a firm hold within one year. Nevertheless, Xi faces significant challenges in his leadership: How to curtail corruption? How to restore the Chinese people’s faith in their political system? How to give property rights and full citizenship to peasants, yet curtail migration to cities? How to make the judiciary system more independent, yet still subordinate to the needs of the communist party? These are difficult issues to manage and represent some of the irreconcilable contradictions of the Chinese political system.