

The Succession of Hu Jintao

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The anticipated succession of Hu Jintao to be China's top-ranking leader at the upcoming Sixteenth Party Congress will cap the outcome of a ten-year effort to groom him for the position. If Hu does in fact replace Jiang Zemin, the transition in leaders will mark an important new step in the effort, launched by Deng Xiaoping two decades ago, to institutionalize orderly processes in PRC politics. As the Party's top leader, Hu will likely play to the party's center to maintain his own power, while cautiously but steadily extending the liberalizing policies of Jiang Zemin in much the same manner that Jiang did those of his predecessor Deng Xiaoping.

Planning Leadership Succession in China

Leadership succession has long been recognized as one of the critical failings of communist political systems everywhere. No Soviet leader succeeded to the top through a process of planned leadership transition. Instead, every paramount Soviet leader died in office except Khrushchev, who was overthrown in a leadership power struggle in 1964, and Gorbachev, who presided over the demise of the USSR itself. Every successor to the top position--from Stalin through Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko to Gorbachev--emerged out of a sometimes prolonged struggle for power. No former Soviet bloc state in Eastern Europe provides an example of institutionalized leadership succession, nor does the essentially dynastic succession of Kim Jong-il to his father in North Korea in 1994.

For most of the PRC's history, the story has been no different. The designation of Liu Shaoqi implicitly and, later, of Lin Biao explicitly as Mao's successor failed amid the ferocious leadership politics of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The previously obscure Hua Guofeng emerged as Mao's successor as Party chairman after Mao's death in 1976 on only the thinnest of justifications--a hand-written note, supposedly given Hua by Mao, which stated simply, "With you in charge, I am at ease." Hua's tenure ended soon after his control over the Party agenda was broken by Deng Xiaoping at the watershed Third Plenum in December 1978. His power was severely undercut by the designation of Deng's lieutenant Hu Yaobang as party general secretary at the February 1980 Fifth Plenum, and Hu formally replaced Hua as party chairman at the Sixth Plenum in June 1981. The post of party chairman was abolished altogether at the 1982 Twelfth Party Congress, leaving the post of general secretary as the party's top leadership position.

In an attempt to provide for orderly generational leadership transition, Deng Xiaoping never assumed the top party post over the ensuing fifteen-year period in which he dominated China's politics. Deng, in fact, never ranked higher than third in the formal party hierarchy.

Instead, he delegated the top party post first to Hu Yaobang and later to Zhao Ziyang, believing that they could carry on his policies of reform as he passed from the scene. Both Hu and Zhao nevertheless fell victim to leadership power struggles--Hu in January 1987, in the context of an emerging campaign against "bourgeois liberalization," and Zhao, in the midst of leadership deadlock over the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989. The present party general secretary, Jiang Zemin, succeeded Zhao in 1989 in those circumstances.

In Jiang's case, Deng's effort to ensure an orderly transition in leadership succeeded. Several factors account for this success. First, by the time of Deng's death in February 1997, Jiang had been in the top party post for almost eight years. Over that time, Jiang had opportunity to overcome his initially weak standing in central leadership politics--he had been elevated to the top post from the position of party boss in Shanghai--by building a base of power in Beijing, recruiting allies among the central bureaucracies, bringing cronies up to the capital from Shanghai, and building ties among the People's Liberation Army (PLA) brass.

Second, most of the veteran revolutionary elders who had dominated the reform politics of the 1980s--and at times complicated them--had passed from the scene by the time of Deng's death. In the early 1990s, elder leaders such as Hu Qiaomu, Li Xiannian, Yao Yilin, and especially Chen Yun--perhaps the one leader whose Politburo tenure and experience allowed him to talk down to Deng--severely weakened the conservative reform wing of the leadership. Deng once again displayed his characteristically astute political wisdom by dying off last among the "second generation" leadership, strengthening the hold of Jiang Zemin on power.

Finally, Jiang benefited from a broader effort by Deng Xiaoping to institutionalize politics after the tumultuous decades of "revolutionary" politics under Mao Zedong. This effort, aimed at making China's political system better able to guide a rapidly modernizing economy and society and not at democratization, has encompassed all of the processes and procedures of the Communist Party and the PRC state structures. On the whole, it has made China's politics far more predictable and orderly.

One major aspect of this effort has been to establish routine processes of leadership transition, both for retirement of aging veteran leaders and for the succession of younger ones. In a major speech that was not publicized at the time but which became a touchstone text for political reform later, Deng Xiaoping strongly criticized "lifetime tenure" in leadership posts. He called on the party to "work out appropriate and explicit regulations for the terms of office and retirement of leading cadres of all categories and at all levels," declaring that "no leading cadre should hold any office indefinitely."¹

In keeping with this call, the 1983 PRC constitution stipulated fixed terms of not more than two consecutive five-year terms of office for top state positions, including PRC president, chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC), and premier of the State Council. With respect to the Communist Party, a new party constitution, adopted in 1982,

stipulated (Article 36) that leaders “are not entitled to lifelong tenure” and that those who are “no longer fit to continue work due to old age or poor health should retire according to state regulations.” Nevertheless, the 1982 party constitution did not stipulate specific limits on term of office and length of tenure for top party posts, including general secretary.

Over the next several years, Deng engineered a massive turnover in leadership generations, which established important precedents for leadership succession subsequently. The 1982 Twelfth Party Congress created a Central Advisory Commission, offering veteran leaders an official body from which they could advise younger front-line leaders after retirement. Beginning at a 1985 party conference and continuing at the Thirteenth Party Congress in 1987, the Long March generation leaders, including Deng himself, retired from the Politburo. Deng gave up his last posts--chairman of the party and PRC Central Military Commissions (CMC) in 1989 and 1990, respectively. In their place was promoted a “third generation” of top leaders, led after 1989 by Jiang Zemin. In the 1990s, at the 1992 Fourteenth and 1997 Fifteenth Party Congresses, that generation consolidated its dominance at the top as the previous generation of retired elders gradually died off.

Meanwhile, in the early 1990s, an internal party rule--never publicly acknowledged in PRC media--was adopted that requires, with the exception of the “core leader,” that leaders under consideration for appointment to the Politburo not exceed seventy years of age and that Politburo leaders older than seventy retire at the next party congress. In a precedent-establishing first case, Politburo appointments at the 1997 party congress appear to have followed this rule. Excluding “core leader” Jiang Zemin himself, all six leaders who had reached the age of 70 did in fact retire--including the NPC Chairman Qiao Shi, who was widely rumored to be struggling to retain an active post. Meanwhile, a “fourth generation” of leaders also began to gain appointment to the Politburo level.

Overall, these changes fulfilled Deng’s goals, and they stand as an extraordinary departure from the broader failures of communist systems in managing orderly leadership transition. They facilitated a wholesale turnover in leadership generations, replacing the generation of veteran revolutionaries with a generation of professionally educated leaders who had risen to power through the bureaucratic hierarchies of the PRC itself. The turnover also produced a generation of leaders that was nearly a decade younger than Deng’s generation when they took power in the late 1970s. The average age of the twenty-five Politburo members of Deng’s generation appointed at the 1982 party congress was seventy-two; the average age of the twenty-four Politburo members appointed in 1997 along with Jiang Zemin was sixty-three. Finally, the turnover of leadership generation that Deng engineered created a powerful precedent that shapes the thinking and, perhaps, the behavior of Jiang Zemin and his generation regarding their own retirement.

Grooming Hu Jintao

PRC media have never named Hu Jintao as Jiang's intended successor as party general secretary. It has nevertheless long been clear that Hu was designated as the "core" leader of the emerging "fourth generation" of leaders eventually to displace Jiang's generation. Several steps over the past ten years indicate Hu's candidacy:

- Hu gained a "helicopter" promotion from his post as party secretary in Tibet straight up to the Standing Committee of the Politburo--the key seven-member decision-making core group of the central leadership--at the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992. He had not previously served on the Politburo either as full or alternate member.
- At the 1992 congress, Hu was also appointed to the party Secretariat. In that position, Hu began working closely with General Secretary Jiang Zemin in running the party apparatus, a key responsibility and a major opportunity to establish networks throughout the party. Historically, paramount leaders in communist systems--from Stalin to Deng Xiaoping--have taken this route to the top. According to a 1992 PRC media report, Hu was in charge of "the day-to-day matters of the Secretariat."² Also in that capacity, Hu assisted in the selection of the Central Committee elected at the 1997 party congress.
- Complementing his role in running the party apparatus with Jiang, in October 1993 Hu became president of the Central Party School, a post he still holds. During his tenure, the school emerged as a major center for debating controversial questions, including reform of the Communist Party itself.
- At the Ninth NPC in 1998, Hu was appointed vice president of the PRC. This appointment symbolically enhanced Hu's stature as second to Jiang. Additionally, it provided him a state post of high-ranking protocol, allowing him to begin routinely to meet visiting foreign leaders and establish international visibility more actively than when he had held only party posts.
- At the Fifteenth Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in September 1999, Hu was appointed vice chairman of the party Central Military Commission. As the only other non-professional military man on the key military decision-making body, this clearly put him line to succeed Jiang as chairman.

The effort to groom Hu has been evident in other ways. Following his appointment as PRC vice president in the spring of 1998, his foreign travels increased. In April 1998, he visited Tokyo and Seoul. The following December, he made an official visit to Hanoi. In 1999, he toured several countries in southern Africa. In January 2001, he visited Damascus, Amman, and Kampala. In April 2001, he represented the CPC at the Ninth Vietnamese Communist Party Congress in Hanoi. And in the fall, he toured Moscow, London, Paris,

Madrid, and Berlin. Over that period, he also received numerous high-level visitors, including heads of state.

Hu has taken on other occasional public roles that underscore his status. In July 1998, for instance, Hu gave the keynote speech announcing PLA divestiture from business activities. In televised remarks on May 10, 1999, he conveyed Beijing's most authoritative reaction to the American bombing of the PRC embassy in Belgrade.

PRC media have likewise never stated explicitly that Jiang will retire at the upcoming party congress, even though, according to foreign media accounts, he has frequently stated so in conversations with foreign visitors. There have nevertheless been indirect indications in the media that imply Jiang's upcoming retirement. Following the party anniversary on July 1, 2001, for example, the website of *People's Daily*--the party Central Committee's newspaper--carried a six-part series entitled "China under the Leadership of Jiang Zemin." As if outlining the main features of Jiang's political legacy, the series recounted significant decisions and policy departures the party made through the 1990s under Jiang's guidance in several areas of foreign and domestic affairs.³

Hu's Political Leanings

The course of Hu Jintao's ascent into the national party leadership and his public statements since provide an ambiguous picture of his personal political leanings. In many respects, Hu is typical of the rising "fourth generation" of technocratic leaders. He is a 1965 graduate of Qinghua University--China's most prestigious technical school. Following the "double-load" track instituted by Qinghua President Jiang Nanxiang in the early 1950s to produce technocratic cadres offering both technical expertise and political skills, Hu majored in hydraulic engineering and also served as a political counsellor. He joined the Communist Party in 1964, a year before graduating.⁴

Thereafter, he spent his early career rising through party bureaucracies where his technical qualifications and political expertise--and especially his Qinghua connections--were his strongest credentials. From the late 1970s into the 1980s, his primary benefactor was Song Ping, a relatively conservative member of the Deng Xiaoping reform coalition that dominated PRC politics after 1978. Song promoted Hu's advance into higher positions, first in Gansu province, where Song was party chief and where Hu had been working since the late 1960s, and then at the national level in the early 1980s. On Song's recommendation, Hu was appointed secretary of Gansu's Communist Youth League (CYL) and member of the national CYL Secretariat in 1982. He became first secretary of the national CYL organization in 1984. Hu's CYL appointments undoubtedly required the endorsement of the relatively liberal reformer and then party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who had close association with the CYL since the 1950s.

From 1985 to 1988, Hu served as party chief in Guizhou, one of China's poorest provinces. (One story from this period states that Hu was also considered in 1985 for the post of director of the party Propaganda Department and given the Guizhou post only after that position went to Zhu Houze--perhaps in hindsight a fortunate turn of events, given Zhu's purge in January 1987 in the campaign against "bourgeois liberalization.") From 1988 to 1992, Hu served as party chief in Tibet, the first civilian appointed to that post in PRC history. Hu presided over the suppression of Tibetan unrest during that tenure, but his appearances in Lhasa were rare, and he appears to have spent most of the period in Beijing. In 1992 he reportedly participated in the task of assembling nominations for the new Central Committee, foreshadowing his "helicopter" promotion onto the Politburo Standing Committee at the Fourteenth Party Congress that year.

This career path to the top leadership suggests several conclusions about Hu's political proclivities. First, he demonstrated a capacity to work with and gain the favor of conservative members of the Deng Xiaoping reform coalition, including his patron Song Ping and presumably others in that group, such as Chen Yun, Li Xiannian, and Yao Yilin. Second, he has also been politically acceptable to the opposite wing of the party leadership, given his probable association with Hu Yaobang in the early 1980s. Third, he has been ready to take on difficult posts--in Guizhou and then in Tibet--however much he may or may not have distinguished himself in either.

Hu's apparent acceptability to both broad wings of the party leadership, together with his technocratic credentials, probably aided his selection for the top leadership in 1992. Since then, Hu has demonstrated both a dedicated discipline in following Jiang Zemin's leadership and a quiet but still visible interest in liberalizing reform. The former has been evident in his steadfast support for key Jiang themes, such as pressing the "three represents"--the call announced by Jiang in early 2000 to broaden the party's base in society by recruiting emerging commercial, technical, and professional elite. Hu has prominently and repeatedly voiced support for this effort, now trumpeted as a key element of Jiang's legacy. At the same time, Hu's reformist inclinations are suggested by the evolution of the Central Party School under his tenure since 1993 as president into a think-tank active in debate over political reform. Hu has been aided in this by his executive vice president at the school, Zheng Bijian--who formerly served as personal secretary to both Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang during their tenure as party general secretary. These indications of a readiness to contemplate sensitive topics such as political reform--including reform of the party itself--have emerged only as Hu reached the top levels of the party. They also emerged in a political environment that increasingly favored new reform, as most of the conservative elders died off in the early 1990s (though his patron Song Ping is still alive). They may therefore suggest Hu's personal bent toward further reform.

Taken together, these indications suggest that as general secretary Hu will be pragmatic (befitting his technocratic outlook), cautious and compromising (ready to work with both wings of the party), but still inclined to press reforms in politics and the economy. These

traits suit the daunting policy agenda that Hu will face as general secretary. That agenda includes dealing with the de-stabilizing economic and social impact of China's joining the World Trade Organization, finding ways to sustain the Communist Party's dominating hold over a rapidly evolving society, and managing a difficult relationship with United States. Such leadership traits also replicate those of Jiang Zemin, who has faced the same agenda of issues, and so they suggest that Hu's policy approaches will build on those of Jiang Zemin and may proceed farther in a reform direction over time.

Such leadership traits also suit the post of general secretary as that post appears to operate in contemporary times. The only concrete formal powers the party constitution gives the general secretary are to convene meetings of the Politburo and its Standing Committee and to preside over the work of the party Secretariat, which oversees implementation of Politburo decisions throughout the party and state hierarchies. As China's leadership processes have steadily become more institutionalized under the efforts of Deng Xiaoping and then Jiang Zemin, the role of the general secretary has evolved. In an increasingly collectivized leadership, in which top leaders each represent increasingly complex policy arenas, the general secretary has become foremost a referee of competing constituencies and interests mediated through increasingly institutionalized processes. In recent remarks on his leadership style, Jiang Zemin described his role as one of providing "strong leadership" in an essentially "democratic" decision-making process in weekly meetings of the Politburo Standing Committee.⁵ Hu's pragmatic, cautious, and moderate leadership traits may serve him well in such a context.

As general secretary, Hu will retain a natural interest--as demonstrated by both by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin--in laying claim to the moderate middle in party politics and in not becoming identified exclusively with either the conservative or liberal wings of the party. Playing to the middle will allow him to consolidate and sustain his power by balance of power techniques of playing one side against the other as need demands. The politics of his leadership will also be aided--and perhaps complicated--by the creation of a new generation of retired leadership elders--including Li Peng, Zhu Rongji, and Jiang himself. The new elders may be counted on both as a source of advice and as a source of meddling, as was the case with the previous generation of elders during the early years of Jiang Zemin's tenure as general secretary.

Related Issues

If Hu's succession to the post of general secretary proceeds as planned, a number of key questions regarding decision-making responsibilities remain. First, will Hu take over the post of chairman of the party and state Central Military Commissions? On one hand, by the time of the Sixteenth Party Congress later this year, Hu will have served three years as vice chairman of the commission, and so arguably he will be prepared to take over as chairman, despite his previous lack of any military experience.

On the other hand, the argument may be made that Jiang Zemin should retain his present post as chairman even after retiring from his positions as party general secretary and PRC president while Hu continues to build support among the PLA leadership. Numerous reports of uncertain validity in the independent Hong Kong China-watching press allege that Jiang has been making that case in recent months. Deng Xiaoping himself established the precedent for such a transitional arrangement. In 1987 at the Thirteenth Party Congress, Deng retained the CMC chairmanship after retiring from all other party and state posts. At the same time, party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang--who had little military experience--was given the post of CMC vice chairman, undoubtedly to give him time to establish himself among the PLA brass and take over the chairmanship, allowing Deng to retire completely. Zhao, however, was removed as party leader in the context of the leadership split over the Tiananmen demonstrations in the spring of 1989. In the end, Deng did retire from the CMC the following autumn, turning his post over the new party General Secretary Jiang Zemin in November 1989. At that time, Jiang--who also lacked any military experience--had a tenure on the commission of only five months.

Second, will Hu take over leadership of the party's Foreign Affairs (FALSG) and Taiwan Leadership Small Groups (TALSG)? For most of the Jiang era, the leader of the FALSG--which takes overall charge of running foreign policy--was Premier Li Peng. In 1998, however, when Zhu Rongji replaced Li as premier, Jiang Zemin took over leadership of the group while Zhu focused on economic policy. In keeping with this change, a new party Central Committee Foreign Affairs Office replaced the State Council's Foreign Affairs Office as the coordinating body facilitating work of the FALSG. Jiang previously had already chaired the TALSG, and so after 1998 he chaired all of the key foreign affairs and military decision-making bodies—the FALSG, TALSG, and CMC. Whether Hu will take on all of these posts or a different division of leadership labor will diffuse responsibilities in this sensitive arena is not clear and will undoubtedly depend on appointments among the other top leadership posts, especially premier.

¹ "On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership," in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975-1982* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 314.

² *Zhongguo Xinwenshe*, November 3, 1992, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report--China*, November 5, 1992, p.26.

³ "Jiang Zemin lingdao xia de Zhongguo--Yi shinian huigu he xinshiji de zhanwang" [China under Jiang Zemin--A Ten-Year Review and the Prospects for the New Century], *Renminwang* (www.people.com.cn), July 6-11, 2001.

⁴ The role of Hu Jintao's Qinghua connections are assessed in greater detail in Li Cheng, *China's Leaders--The New Generation* (Lanhan, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), pp.87-121, and especially pp.116-119, on which the much of the account here draws.

⁵ *Wen Wei Po*, September 11, 2001, via World News Connection, September 11, 2001, document no. Ogmfnb00d7hs2.