

With Hu in Charge, Jiang's at Ease

Lyman Miller

Jiang Zemin's replacement by Hu Jintao as China's highest military leader at a major party meeting in September 2004 completes the process of top leadership succession begun two years earlier. Hu's orderly succession to Jiang—first as the top party leader, then as People's Republic of China (PRC) president, and now as China's commander-in-chief—stands as the only instance of a successfully planned retirement of a top leader in favor of a younger designated successor in the history of a major communist country. It also provokes fundamental questions about how the top leadership level of China's political process works today.

Jiang Zemin's retirement from and Hu Jintao's promotion to the post of chairman of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Central Military Commission (CMC) took place at the 16th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum on September 16–19, 2004. PRC media have since reported that the upcoming annual session of the National People's Congress (NPC), scheduled to open in early March 2005, will address Jiang's complementary resignation from his post as chairman of the state CMC, which without doubt will also go to Hu Jintao.

The transfer of the top military post to Hu Jintao completes a leadership transition that began at the November 2002 16th Party Congress, when Jiang ceded his position as the party's general secretary to Hu. At the 10th NPC in March 2003, Jiang ceded his post as PRC president to Hu. Hu's succession to the top party, state, and military posts caps a 10-year process of planned succession that began with Hu's elevation to the Politburo Standing Committee and to executive secretary of the party Secretariat in 1992, and continued with his appointment as PRC vice president in 1998 and as CMC vice chairman in 1999. Hu's succession replicates the pattern of concentrating all three top party, military, and state posts in a single leader's hands that began with Jiang Zemin's tenure in these positions over the 1989–93 period.

The Fourth Plenum also appointed the commanders of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) three specialized services—the PLA Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery (China's strategic forces)—as members of the CMC. The plenum is notable also in what it did not do: Politburo Standing Committee member Zeng Qinghong was not added as a vice chairman to the CMC. In the leadership transition begun in 2002, Zeng had up until the Fourth Plenum taken on the same array of high-level posts that Hu Jintao had gained as apparent successor to Jiang Zemin in the previous leadership transition—executive secretary of the Secretariat, president of the Central Party School, and PRC vice president.

Jiang since the Plenum

On September 20, 2004, the day after the Fourth Plenum closed, Jiang and Hu appeared together at a CMC meeting held to mark the transfer of power. In remarks to the meeting publicized in PRC media, Hu saluted Jiang's leadership of China's military over the preceding 15 years, and Jiang endorsed Hu's qualifications to command the PLA as his successor. In particular, Jiang underscored the importance of the top party, state, and military posts being held by a single leader for the stability of the party, country, and military.

Up until the Fourth Plenum, Jiang had appeared regularly in public, though at a reduced level from his omnipresent public profile before the 2002–3 transition. After March 2003, Jiang appeared as CMC chairman at major military events, at major holiday festivities, and at many major party and state occasions. He also held courtesy meetings with visiting heads of state and other leaders from major countries, and he engaged in a variety of other public activities, such as signing new military edicts and regulations and writing inscriptions in his own calligraphy for new books and journals. His last publicized foreign travel was his visit to Crawford, Texas, to meet with President Bush—a trip that included a subsequent tour of Latin America—in October 2002.

Since the September 20, 2004, CMC meeting, however, Jiang has adopted a sharply reduced public appearance posture consistent with that of other high-level leaders who have retired in recent years to become party elders. In the four and a half months following the CMC meeting down through early February 2005:

- Jiang has appeared in public only twice—attending a Beijing opera party on December 30, 2004, marking the upcoming New Year and joining funeral observances for deceased party elder Song Renqiong on January 15, 2005. On both occasions, he was listed without title and second in the leadership lineup after Hu Jintao. He did not attend National Day observances on October 1, 2004, or other New Year celebrations, among other occasions.
- Jiang has not received a foreign dignitary. His last such reception came when he met with Philippines President Arroyo on September 2, 2004, two weeks before the Fourth Plenum.
- Jiang has not conducted an inspection tour of PLA units. He last inspected troops in August 2004.

Jiang's retirement was marked with a full-page photo spread of highlights of his leadership in the September 21, 2004, *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*), the party's mouthpiece. In September and October, several long media articles recounted his contributions to military affairs, party reform, ethnic minority policy, and other areas during his leadership. The relevance of "Jiang Zemin thinking" to current efforts at military modernization continues to be stressed in media discourse on the topic. Jiang continues on occasion to be credited with giving original voice to the leadership's "collective wisdom" of the "three represents"—the jargon encapsulating the leadership's

ongoing effort to coopt into the party the professional, technical, and economic elites that are emerging as a consequence of China's economic reforms. Chinese media continue, however, to refer to "Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and the important thinking of the 'three represents'" as the CCP's current ideological platform, a usage that drops reference to Jiang's role in enunciating the ideology that has been standard since May 2000, when it became the leadership consensus.

Since September 2004, Jiang has continued to sign new edicts governing the PLA in his capacity as chairman of the state CMC. This peculiar arrangement, in which the party's CMC is currently headed by Hu while the state CMC is headed by Jiang, is a product of institutional fussiness: the party Central Committee is empowered to make leadership changes in party institutions, while the NPC and its Standing Committee are empowered to do so for state posts. The six-month hiatus between the Fourth Plenum and the upcoming NPC session thus creates an ambiguous and potentially confusing situation with regard to who currently commands the PLA—Jiang or Hu? A technical reading of the party and PRC constitutions, together with the 1997 defense law, suggests that the state CMC and its chairman command the PLA, while the party CMC manages only the party apparatus in the military through the PLA General Political Department. However, major political decisions—including when to go to war—are made by the party Politburo and its Standing Committee, on which Jiang no longer sits. So were China to go to war or use military force before the upcoming NPC session has completed the transfer of authority from Jiang to Hu, the question of who actually commands the PLA seems unsettlingly ambiguous.

Hu Jintao as Military Leader

Meanwhile, since the September 2004 plenum, Hu Jintao has appeared regularly and confidently in his new role as China's top military leader. On September 25, he promoted his first two generals—Navy Commander Zhang Dingfa and Second Artillery Commander Jing Zhiyuan. In December 2004 and January 2005, new appointments were made under his direction in some of the PLA's general departments and within China's seven military regions. He has begun inspecting PLA units, including his review of the PLA garrison in Macao in December 2004, and he has delivered keynote addresses as CMC chairman at military conferences.

PRC media have also advertised Hu's smooth assumption of his new military post and the PLA's acceptance of his leadership. An article in the Hong Kong communist newspaper *Wen wei po* assessing Hu's ideas on military affairs noted that he "has established his authority as commander and won the support of the generals." Hu's "unique charisma as a leader has already won us over," *Wen wei po* stated. Similarly, a December 29, 2004, dispatch of the Xinhua-associated news service *Zhongguo tongxunshu* observed that Hu "has quickly entered into the spirit of his newfound role, led the armed forces in a methodical way, established his authority as commander in a relatively short time, and won the support of the officers and men."

Significance of the Transition

The near completion of the leadership transition from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao is important for three reasons. First, the transition is the only instance in the history of a major communist country of an orderly, planned succession by a retiring top leader in favor of a designated successor. All of the successions of top leaders in Soviet politics from Lenin to Gorbachev involved the death in office or a purge of the top leader, and neither of the successions in China—after Mao Zedong and, despite his persistent efforts to the contrary, after Deng Xiaoping—followed an orderly, planned process. In this respect, Hu's succession, 10 years in preparation, is a testament to Deng's comprehensive effort to institutionalize the PRC's political processes.

Second, Hu's succession confirms the trend, which began with Jiang Zemin's accession to power in 1989–93, of a purely civilian leadership in China's top political and military posts. From the beginning of the 20th century until the early 1990s, China was governed by a succession of professional military leaders—or since 1949, by professional revolutionaries—who by virtue of their long military experience were indistinguishably military and political leaders. This fact reflected the militarization of China's politics as the former Manchu Qing Dynasty declined and as regional and military leaders gathered more power into their hands at the expense of the imperial regime, all in the wake of the effort to suppress the Christianity-inspired Taiping rebellion in the 1850s and 1860s. In these circumstances, since the turn of the century, China's paramount leaders have been simultaneously military as well as political men:

- Yuan Shikai commandeered the bulk of resources committed by the Qing's military modernization program, launched in 1903, to strengthen the military units directly under his command—the Beiyang Army—making them the empire's most modern forces. Forced into retirement in 1908 because of imperial court concerns about his predominating military power, he was nevertheless recalled back into power in late 1911 to deal with the accelerating secession of provinces from the Qing in the 1911 Revolution. Yuan in turn brokered the abdication of the Qing and pushed aside Sun Yat-sen to become the new Republic of China's (ROC) president in 1912. He governed as an authoritarian military strongman until his death in 1916.
- In the wake of Yuan's death, a succession of military leaders—many of whom had been Yuan's Beiyang Army lieutenants—competed to establish themselves as paramount leader over the Republican government, an era commonly recalled as China's "warlord" period.
- In 1927–28, the machinery of Republican government was taken over by a victorious Kuomintang-CCP military force built with Soviet assistance and led by Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang, a professional military man trained in Japan, dominated the ROC's politics until the communist revolution of 1949 forced his regime's retreat to Taiwan. Taiwan itself remained under martial law, imposed in 1946, until 1991.
- Mao Zedong led the communist revolutionary movement that founded the PRC, and for most of the period since the PLA's founding in 1927 was its principal strategist and commander. He remained chairman of the CMC throughout his leadership of the

PRC until his death in 1976, and he was personally responsible not only for setting the overarching strategy of the PRC's wars throughout that period, but also frequently for dictating the PLA's operations in those wars.

- Mao's immediate successor, Hua Guofeng, had no experience in military command, and was pushed aside only 14 months after his assumption of the post of CMC chairman in October 1976. From 1978 until his formal retirement in 1989–90, China's paramount political and military leader was Deng Xiaoping, a man of long experience in military command. Deng's large network of connections in the PLA was an enduring source of his political power, as it had been for Mao.

The succession of first Jiang Zemin and then Hu Jintao to the PRC's top military post thus marks a signal break in the nearly century-long pattern of political-military leaders dominating China's political order. On assuming the posts of party general secretary and CMC chairman, both men brought with them no military credentials or experience.

The political leadership around Jiang and Hu has also become thoroughly civilian, without military experience or service in China's military bureaucracies. Of the 24 leaders appointed to the party Politburo with Hu Jintao in 2002, none has any meaningful military experience except the two professional military men appointed to represent the PLA in the party's top decision-making body. The Politburo membership appointed together with Jiang Zemin in 1997 was similarly devoid of military experience or credentials, except for the PLA appointees, Generals Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian. Under Jiang Zemin and now Hu Jintao, China has attained thoroughly civilian leadership over both its political and military hierarchies for the first time in nearly a century.

Third, the transfer of power from Jiang to Hu marks a significant step toward the institutionalization of China's politics. Jiang's retirement matched step-for-step the staged retirement of Deng Xiaoping in 1989. Deng retired from his Politburo post in 1987, retaining only his chairmanship of the party and state CMC until his retirement from those posts in 1989 and 1990, respectively. This staged, two-year retirement undoubtedly reflected an attempt to allow the new party general secretary, Zhao Ziyang, to establish his authority and, with his appointment as CMC vice chairman, to habilitate himself—a man without military experience—among the PLA brass. These plans went awry during the Tiananmen crisis in spring 1989, when Zhao was purged and replaced by Jiang Zemin. Deng went ahead with his retirement from the CMC the following fall anyway, making Jiang China's top military leader after only five months' service as vice chairman of the CMC.

In the present leadership transition, not only does Jiang's retirement precisely mimic Deng's, but it also strengthens the force of the precedent for Hu himself. According to the now-established pattern, Hu would be expected to yield his party and state posts to a successor at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 and the 12th NPC in 2013. He would retain his CMC posts before ceding them to his successor in 2014–15.

Institutionalization: The Twilight of Factional Politics?

Leadership statements and PRC media commentary on Hu's accession as CMC chairman have underscored the significance of the leadership transition in terms of institutionalization. An editorial marking the 16th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in the PLA newspaper *Liberation Army Daily* (*Jiefangjun bao*) on September 21, 2004, saluted Jiang's decision to retire from the CMC as contributing to "the institutionalization, normalization, and proceduralization of older party, state, and military leaders giving way to the new." An editorial on the plenum in the party's policy journal *Seeking Truth* (*Qiushi*) commented similarly that Hu's succession to Jiang at the CMC "has made a historical contribution by establishing the succession of an older generation of leaders by a new one as a system, norm, and procedure."

The orderly succession to Jiang by Hu may be seen as the culmination of Deng Xiaoping's efforts to institutionalize China's political processes, the hallmark of his political reforms. Mao had mistrusted institutions, believing that they bred new elites whose existence violated the egalitarian revolutionary ideals for which he had fought the revolution, so he favored mass movements and "revolutionary" spontaneity to promote the transformation of society. Deng differed profoundly from Mao, seeking not a socially transformative state but rather a regulatory state that could guide rapid modernization to build China's wealth and power. A law, order, and discipline man, Deng valued institutionalized politics and rationalized bureaucratic routines, which he sought to restore from the very beginning of his leadership. Thanks to this effort, party congresses and plenums and NPC sessions have met precisely according to stipulations in the party and state constitutions. Subordinate bureaucratic processes—such as the presentation of annual budgets to the NPC and so forth—followed in step and have lent predictability to China's political processes. Efforts to promote younger leaders having the educational and administrative credentials to govern a society and economy in the midst of accelerating modernizing change were regularized, while the aging revolutionary veterans who had created the PRC and dominated its politics over the four decades since its founding were pressed to retire. Constitutional term limits abolished the "lifetime tenure" of leaders in top state posts, while regularized retirement and promotion processes were put in place in the recreated PLA officer corps in the 1980s. Internal party norms based on age were set, apparently in the 1990s, for the retirement of top party leaders, including those on the Politburo itself.

This advancing effort to routinize the PRC's political processes has produced a much more thoroughly institutionalized leadership system. This change is immediately visible with a glance at the composition of the party Politburo under Hu Jintao, compared with those of the Mao and Deng eras. (For a current listing of the Politburo leadership, click on the "Reference" link on the *CLM* home page.) The Politburo is no longer simply the reservoir of the most powerful leaders and their most important clients, as it was in Mao's and Deng's days. Thanks to Deng's institutionalizing reforms, it has become increasingly an ex officio body, whose members concurrently hold leading positions in the principal bureaucracies relevant to comprehensive, balanced, and rational policymaking in the Politburo. The Politburo Standing Committee thus includes the

leaders of the party itself (the general secretary), the NPC, the State Council (the premier), and the national united front umbrella organization known as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference as its four top-ranking members. The remainder of the Standing Committee and the broader Politburo itself include all the vice premiers; the heads of the party's Propaganda and Organization Departments, as well as of the critically important General Office; the two senior vice chairmen of the CMC, both professional military men; the party chiefs of several key provinces; and several other leaders relevant to top-level decision-making. In a real sense, these leaders sit on the Politburo to represent the perspectives of the bureaucracies over which they preside in the process of comprehensive policymaking. A comparable pattern of representative appointment is visible the next level down, in the composition of provincial party committees.

This transformation of the Politburo is complemented by other changes, especially those implemented during Hu's tenure as general secretary. It seems increasingly apparent that Hu's designation since the 2002 party congress simply as the general secretary of the current Central Committee—rather than as the “core” of the current “fourth generation” leadership—reflects an effort to play up the Politburo's commitment to collective decision-making. Drawing on aborted steps taken in the late 1980s during Zhao Ziyang's tenure, efforts during Hu's tenure to enhance Politburo transparency by publicizing its meetings and to emphasize Politburo accountability in decision-making by instituting regular reports to the Central Committee appear similarly aimed at advancing the institutionalization of leadership processes.

A comparable transformation is visible in the CMC, the top military decision-making body. Since the late 1990s, the CMC has been composed of the PLA representatives on the party Politburo and Secretariat as vice chairmen and of the directors of the PLA's four general departments as members. The party general secretary has presided as the lone civilian (with the exception of his apparent successor). The September 2004 plenum's appointment of the commanders of the PLA's three specialized services as additional members of the CMC only enhances the CMC's representative characteristics. PRC commentary on these commanders' addition to the CMC has explained that their appointment reflects the enhanced importance that the Navy, Air Force, and strategic forces have in contemporary warfare of the type China has been preparing to be able to fight since the mid-1980s.

The transformation of the Politburo toward ex officio representation does not make the appointment of its membership any less political, or the struggle for power any less competitive. Presumably, appointments to posts that merit concurrent membership on the Politburo are considered and fought over with the high stakes in mind. But it would seem nevertheless that this evolution in favor of institutionalized processes is changing the dynamics of policymaking and leadership politics in Beijing. Factional frameworks for analyzing Chinese politics—derived from the intense and scarcely concealed conflicts of the Mao era or even from the less dramatic political contests during Deng Xiaoping's heyday in the 1980s—no longer seem as effective in explaining

the outcome of the leadership conflict and competition that must exist within the lattice of institutions that structures Chinese politics today.

An Arranged Succession?

A case in point regarding the changing political dynamics may be the transfer of Jiang's CMC post to Hu itself. In the weeks leading up to the September 2004 plenum, the independent Hong Kong press and Western media reported indications of a titanic power struggle over Jiang's retirement. These accounts depicted Jiang either as using cross-Strait tensions and other issues to justify his continuing tenure as CMC chairman or as exacting concessions from the Hu leadership in exchange for his retirement. These reports cited blow-by-blow "insider" accounts of ongoing factional conflict among the leadership, as well as inferences drawn from PRC media regarding Jiang's elevated public profile.

These accounts suffered from a number of fundamental weaknesses. First, the accounts were mutually contradictory, both with respect to the object of the power struggle under way and with respect to the evidence adduced in support. The Hong Kong press has for decades been a repository for rumors, speculations, and sometimes fantasies about what is happening in the confines of Zhongnanhai, the leadership's office compound in Beijing. Such "insider" accounts appear to draw on sources whose access to the inner workings of the party leadership is beyond verification and, frequently, dubious. Such accounts seem of a genre akin to the rumors and speculations that flourish in all great power capitals about the innermost workings of the political leadership, from the Kremlin to No.10 Downing Street to the Oval Office, and they merit the same degree of credibility.

Second, many of the inferences drawn from PRC media were demonstrably erroneous:

- A meeting of several officials presided over by Jiang crony and Hu understudy Zeng Qinghong at the seaside resort at Beidaihe in early August 2004 was cited as a gathering of Jiang's Shanghai Gang, convened to plan strategy for the leadership contest with the Hu administration over Jiang's future in the run-up to the plenum. This interpretation of the meeting's purpose, however, clashed with the fact that Zeng had hosted similar meetings in August in preceding years, all to express the leadership's gratitude for selected groups' contributions to China's modernization. The list of leaders attending the August 2004 gathering, moreover, did not constitute a meaningful quorum of the membership of the Shanghai Gang, but rather more resembled a gathering of those officials directly responsible by protocol for the 2004 group of honorees—in this case, scientists and technicians. (On this and some of the subsequent points, see this author's article, "Commemorating Deng to Press Party Reform," in *China Leadership Monitor* 12 [fall 2004].)

- Despite assertions of Jiang's increased public profile leading into the plenum, the pattern of his public appearances did not in fact deviate either in nature or frequency from the overall pattern in the period since his partial retirement in March 2003.
- Some accounts of leadership conflict cited instances of media attention to inscriptions that Jiang had written to honor exemplary military units in the early 1990s as evidence of a new effort to underscore the indispensability of his continuing ties to and leadership of the PLA. These inferences seemed off target in light of the fact that PRC media had been periodically recalling such inscriptions written years before since at least the late 1990s. More broadly, there was no discernible effort in the media to underscore the indispensability of Jiang's leadership of the PLA so as to justify his continued tenure as CMC chairman.
- Attention to the August 2004 centenary of Deng Xiaoping's birth did not avoid mentioning the precedent of his staged retirement from his leadership posts, nor did leadership statements and media commentary on the occasion highlight the precedent, in a manner intended to pressure a reluctant Jiang Zemin to act upon it.
- A *New York Times* story on September 7, 2004, cited sources who stated that the leadership conflict over Jiang's future had knocked a planned "Decision" on party reform off the upcoming Fourth Plenum's agenda. The credibility of these sources was deflated the same day, however, when a Xinhua report on the Politburo's adoption of the plenum's agenda included the party reform decision. The plenum, of course, did take up the document, a long blueprint for enhancing the CCP's "governing capacity." A long account of the drafting of the party reform decision transmitted by Xinhua in the wake of the plenum gave no indication that the 10-month effort to draft and review the document leading up to the plenum had encountered political difficulty.

These and other problems with evidence and interpretation dissolved much of the substance (if not the sensationalism) of the accounts of leadership conflict over Jiang's retirement from the CMC.

Instead, a credible case may be made that Jiang's retirement at the Fourth Plenum was long planned, perhaps as far back as the 2002 party congress, when his staged retirement began.

- Jiang's retirement may have been tipped long before the plenum. A June 21, 2004, dispatch in the Hong Kong communist daily *Wen wei po* reported that the commanders of the Navy, Air Force, and strategic forces would be added as members of the CMC at the September 2004 Central Committee plenum "as part of a larger reshuffle of the CMC." As it happened, the only other element in the CMC's "larger reshuffle" was Jiang's retirement.
- Jiang's withdrawal from his leadership posts followed the precedent of Deng Xiaoping's staged retirement precisely. Attention to the Deng precedent in marking the Deng centenary in August 2004 was matter-of-fact, replicating closely the formulations used in the party's official obituary and in Jiang's speech at memorial ceremonies marking Deng's death in February 1997.

- The Fourth Plenum occurred early in the fall, suggesting that whatever controversy may have existed was not sufficient to postpone it. In the past, fall plenums have convened as late as December.
- In an unusual step in its September 30, 2004, issue, *Beijing Review*, a foreign-language newsmagazine published by Beijing and aimed at international audiences, rebutted speculation in Western media that Jiang was “taking advantage of escalating cross-Strait tensions as an opportunity to stay on” as CMC chairman. “That didn’t happen,” *Beijing Review* observed, predicting that Hu’s succession was “unlikely to result in dramatic changes to domestic, foreign, and economic policies.”

In the absence of compelling evidence or credible information to the contrary, therefore, the existing record conveys the impression of an orderly leadership transition. (For an alternative and not altogether contrasting perspective, see the article by James Mulvenon—“The King Is Dead! Long Live the King! The CMC Leadership Transition from Jiang to Hu”—in this issue of *CLM*.)