

Hu's in Charge?

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee's Fifth Plenum opened amid a swirl of rumors that a major shift in high level party appointments was in the works. Party General Secretary Hu Jintao had finally assumed the array of top leadership positions held by his predecessor Jiang Zemin, and was expected to begin promoting allies onto the party Politburo and dismantling Jiang's power base in Shanghai. Yet the plenum closed without making any changes in official appointments, inviting basic questions both about Hu Jintao's power and, more broadly, about the dynamics of leadership politics in China today.

The 16th Central Committee's Fifth Plenum met in Beijing on 8-11 October 2005. A plenum communiqué publicized on November 11 detailed the meeting's agenda. The schedule consisted of two main items: reviewing Hu Jintao's report on the work of the Politburo since the Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in September 2004, and approving lengthy "proposals" on drafting the 11th five-year "program" for economic development, to be submitted to the National People's Congress (NPC) session in spring 2006. In addition, the plenum heard an "important speech" by Hu Jintao, the content of which has not been publicized in PRC media, and an "explanation" by Premier Wen Jiabao on the five-year program.

Rumored Personnel Changes

In the weeks preceding the plenum, foreign and non-communist Hong Kong media reported that the plenum would likely endorse a series of leadership changes intended to consolidate Hu Jintao's power and weaken that of Jiang Zemin, his predecessor as party general secretary. These changes were anticipated to include replacement of party General Office and Politburo alternate member Wang Gang by Liaoning Li Keqiang, who may have been tapped as Hu's own successor. In addition, Liu Yandong, a Hu associate who has served as party United Front Work Department director for the past three years, was anticipated to replace Chen Liangyu as party chief in Shanghai, long a Jiang base of power.

That the plenum might have made changes at the Politburo level—if Li Keqiang was indeed slated to be added at least as an alternate member—is not altogether implausible. The party constitution gives the Central Committee the authority to make changes in the composition of the party's Politburo, Secretariat, and Central Military

Commission (CMC), and plenums have occasionally done so over the past two decades. For example:

- The 15th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in September 1999 appointed Hu Jintao as vice chairman of the CMC and added Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou as CMC members.
- The 15th Central Committee's Third Plenum in October 1998 added Cao Gangchuan as a member of the CMC, following the creation of the PLA General Armament Department the preceding spring.
- The 14th Central Committee's Fifth Plenum in September 1995 appointed Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian as CMC vice chairman and added Wang Ke and Wang Ruilin as members.
- In a series of moves that strengthened Jiang Zemin's power base in Beijing and marked the rise of the "Shanghai gang" associated with Jiang, the 14th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in September 1994 appointed Shanghai Mayor Huang Ju to the Politburo and added Shanghai party Secretary Wu Bangguo and Shandong party Secretary Jiang Chunyun to the Secretariat.
- The 13th Central Committee's Fifth Plenum in November 1989 accepted the retirement of Deng Xiaoping as party CMC chairman in favor of Jiang Zemin, appointed Yang Shangkun and Liu Huaqing as CMC vice chairmen, and promoted Yang Baibing to CMC secretary-general and the party Secretariat.

Discounting the first plenum of each new Central Committee (whose main task is to appoint an entire new Politburo, Secretariat and CMC), plenums since the 1982 12th CCP Congress have made adjustments to the Politburo, Secretariat, and CMC roughly 30 percent of the time (eight out of 28 plenums). Had the recent Fifth Plenum endorsed changes to the Politburo or other top leadership bodies—such as adding Li Keqiang to the Politburo—there would have been well-established precedent for it.

Chen Liangyu's replacement as Shanghai party chief with Liu Yandong—presuming that it did not also entail his simultaneous replacement on the Politburo—normally would not occur at a Central Committee plenum. Changes in the posts of provincial party secretary and governor are routinely made by the Politburo acting in the name of the Central Committee and reported by the official news agency Xinhua as Central Committee decisions. Changes to the leadership of Central Committee departments are made on the same basis. All such changes are presumably reviewed after the fact by a plenum endorsing the general secretary's "work report."

Past precedent suggests Chen Liangyu's replacement as Shanghai party chief need not have meant his simultaneous replacement on the Politburo. For example, Xie Fei remained on the Politburo after his replacement as Guangdong party chief in the spring of 1998. Nor would Liu Yandong's appointment as Shanghai party chief necessarily have meant her simultaneous appointment to the Politburo, despite Shanghai's enormous political importance. For example, when Tianjin CCP Secretary and Politburo member Tan Shaowen died in December 1992—shortly after the 14th CCP Congress—his successor as Tianjin party chief, Gao Dezhan, was not given Tan's Politburo seat.

It is possible that the anticipated change in the Shanghai party leadership may yet occur, perhaps in the course provincial leadership transfers periodically carried out by Beijing. Since the Fifth Plenum, however, Li Keqiang has continued to serve as Liaoning party secretary. As recently as November 4, Li appeared in Shenyang promoting efforts to combat avian flu. Liu Yandong has also continued to appear in her post as United Front Work Department chief through mid-November. Meanwhile, Chen Liangyu has appeared regularly since the plenum in Shanghai.

What Happened?

The most likely explanation is the simplest: that pre-plenum rumors of pending leadership changes were false. Extensive commentary in the months before the plenum convened gave no hint that its agenda included any item other than consideration of the draft “proposals” for the new five-year plan. Moreover, speculation among mid-level Chinese officials regarding leadership changes at an upcoming plenum, though recorded in the foreign and non-communist media, have had a poor track record in the past. After the 1997 15th Party Congress, for example, nearly every session of the 15th Central Committee was preceded by a new round of rumors that Jiang Zemin was pressing for promotion of his close associate Zeng Qinghong from alternate to full membership in the Politburo. Yet the buzz proved wrong after every event. Either Jiang was remarkably and repeatedly unsuccessful in such attempts, or, more probably, the rumors were simply incorrect.

It is also possible that Hu (and Jiang Zemin before him) had raised the idea of the rumored personnel changes in pre-plenum discussions among the party leadership, but in the end he decided not to pursue them. Nevertheless, his comments would have triggered a swirl of gossip among leaders’ relatives, mid-level officials, academics, and ordinary citizens that were ultimately are recorded in foreign and Hong Kong press reports. While this explanation may be plausible, the rumors of such pending changes are frequently mutually contradictory. Taking into account the questionable record of such accounts, it is often impossible to distinguish the stories with some kernel of truth from those that are sheer speculation and fantasy.

Leadership politics in Beijing foster a flourishing industry in rumor and speculation matching that in all great power capitals. But it seems unlikely that mid-level CCP cadres, much less the ordinary populace, has a clearer idea of what goes on in Zhongnanhai (China’s Kremlin) than mid-level officials in the U.S. government know about what transpires in the White House. Everyone everywhere, however, loves a good rumor, and in a context devoid of hard information, the human impulse is to create a story to fill the void.

Finally, it is also possible that the speculations were correct and that Hu Jintao tried and failed to gain endorsement for the rumored changes he sought. That conclusion, however, flies in the face of other pre-plenum assessments in foreign and non-communist

press accounts. These reports depict Hu solidly in power and moving to consolidate his position at the expense of Jiang's influence.¹

Assessing Hu Jintao's Power

Any assessments of Hu Jintao's power six months after his acquisition of the last top leadership post from Jiang Zemin must take into account several indicators that suggest limitations to Hu's power:

- Hu has yet to establish a visible base of power in the central party apparatus or state bureaucracies. His dominance among Central Committee departments is still limited, especially in the critical General Office and Organization Department.² Some leaders who may be associated with Hu on the basis of their past affiliation with the Communist Youth League (the so-called *tuanpai* 团派) are beginning to emerge in State Council ministries and top provincial leadership posts, but their number remains limited.³
- Several policy initiatives that have emerged since Hu's appointment as party general secretary in November 2002 have not been ascribed to him. These include "people-centered" approaches to social issues, the much heralded "scientific development concept," and the goal of building a "harmonious society."⁴ Hu has frequently been out in front in enunciating these themes, but he is not usually credited personally in PRC media as their originator. Others among the leadership—including Zeng Qinghong, a supposed Jiang crony—also routinely plump for these themes in publicized talks and speeches, giving the impression that the policy approaches are not the intellectual property of Hu Jintao alone. In the communist-controlled Hong Kong press and occasionally in PRC media, these policy departures are often referred to as products of the "Hu-Wen leadership." Such a shared leadership is without parallel in the Chinese media of the Mao, Deng, or Jiang eras.
- Hu has barely begun inspecting military bases and promoting generals as Jiang Zemin did in the early 1990s to consolidate his leadership over the PLA. In reporting on Hu's interactions with the PLA, however, some of the formulations previously applied to Jiang Zemin are being applied to Hu. For example, PRC media, including the army newspaper *Liberation Army Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao* 解放军报), now routinely mention "Chairman Hu" in military contexts—referring to his chairmanship of the party and state Central Military Commissions—and, as they have done since last spring, the media praise Hu's "important expositions on the army's historic mission in the new century."
- There is very little indication of an effort to elevate Hu above the rest of the top party leadership beyond routine protocol for the top-ranked leader. Hu as yet has not been described in PRC media as the progenitor of "thought" (思想 *sixiang*), "theory" (理论 *lilun*), or "important thinking" (重要思想 *zhongyao sixiang*), as have Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, or Jiang Zemin, respectively. As they have since the 16th Party Congress in 2002, PRC media continue to refer only to "the Central

Committee with Comrade Hu Jintao as general secretary,” and not to Hu as “core leader.”

All of these indicators must also be put into a political context that further obscures the political relationships and dynamics in the present leadership. This context has several features:

- The role of the “elders” has seemed to recede. The elders emerged as a political constituency as a consequence of Deng Xiaoping’s 1980s political reforms, which encouraged veteran leaders to retire from front-line leadership positions to make way for younger leaders. In the 1990s, the elders were composed mostly of veteran revolutionaries who together founded the CCP, endured the Long March, fought the Japanese after 1937 and China Kai-shek’s Nationalist government after 1945, founded the PRC. This group dominated the leadership in the 1950s and again in the 1980s after surviving Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Their continuing influence was evident in the ubiquitous stories that circulated regarding their kibitzing in ongoing leadership deliberations. By the late 1990s, most of these leaders—including Deng himself—had passed from the scene. Today’s “elders” are largely “post-liberation and post-revolutionary” leaders who retired at the 1997 15th and 2002 16th party congresses and whose stature does not match that of the revolutionary veterans. This second generation of elders—including Qiao Shi, Li Peng, and Zhu Rongji—appears rarely in public if at all; their efforts to intervene in ongoing leadership affairs generate few stories.
- Among the new elders, Jiang Zemin has also become virtually invisible. His public appearances are infrequent and, in the case of a visit to Tianjin’s Nankai University in September, apparently not publicized in the national media.
- The “workstyle” of the Hu leadership—even more than the Deng and Jiang leaderships—explicitly emphasizes collective deliberation and decision-making, formal accountability to the Central Committee, and some degree of transparency. Together, these features create the image of a leadership collective rather than a group under the direction of a paramount leader.
- Finally, competition and conflict among the leadership—which, as a matter of theological certainty, must exist—since the 1980s has become increasingly embedded in a context of steady institutionalization. There is no reason to believe that China’s leaders today are any less ambitious and conniving as leaders in previous eras of PRC politics. Increasingly, however, their machinations and struggles are executed within a lattice of institutions and routinized procedures that were restored in the Deng period. The rules of politics are evolving accordingly, and the methods of analyzing Chinese leadership politics must evolve in step. Today’s politics no longer resemble the intense factional warfare evident during the Cultural Revolution, and different, as yet uncertain frameworks will be required to analyze them effectively.

Given all of these factors and considerations, it seems premature to conclude that Hu is solidly in control of leadership affairs. With the transfer of all top posts to him completed at the NPC session last March, Hu has acquired supreme authority in the

PRC leadership. However, he has yet to establish paramount power, a process that is likely to take several more years, if Jiang Zemin's power consolidation in the early 1990s is a fair guide.

Preparations for the 2007 17th CCP Congress will help clarify Hu's progress in consolidating power. These preparations will begin in earnest by mid-2006, and the following months until the convocation of the congress will likely provide several useful benchmarks by which to gauge Hu's overall political strength. These may include new rounds of appointments to positions in the provinces and at the national level that normally merit concurrent appointment to the Central Committee, the composition of the committee to draft the political report to be delivered by Hu at the congress, and possibly speeches by Hu at the spring graduation ceremonies at the Central Party School in 2006 and 2007. At the same time, the season for adjustments to the Politburo membership may have already passed. A sixth plenum need not be convened until 2006—most likely, in the fall—and so, in the absence of a compelling reason, new appointments to the Politburo may well be deferred to the party congress in 2007.

Notes

¹ Among several accounts, see "Hu's in Charge," *The Economist*, August 20, 2005, 31-32; Joseph Kahn, "China's Leader, Ex-Rival at Side, Solidifies Power," *New York Times*, September 25, 2005; and "Personnel Reshuffle is Inextricably Associated with Fierce Power Struggle," *Pingguo Ribao* (Apple Daily), October 6, 2005, as translated by FBIS, document number CPP20051006510010.

² See the article by this author in *China Leadership Monitor*, No.15 (Summer 2005).

³ See Li Cheng, "Hu's Policy Shift and the *Tuanpai*'s Coming of Age," *China Leadership Monitor*, No.15 (Summer 2005).

⁴ For a thorough assessment of the "scientific development concept's" lineage, see Joseph Fewsmith, "Promoting the Scientific Development Concept," *China Leadership Monitor*, No.11 (Summer 2004).