

The Best Laid Plans: Xi Jinping and the CMC Vice-Chairmanship that Didn't Happen

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Contrary to the expectations of the China-watching community, Politburo Standing Committee member and presumed heir-apparent Xi Jinping was not promoted to be vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission at the Fourth Plenum in September 2009. This outcome deals a blow to the prevailing theory of leadership succession, which predicted that Xi would follow the pattern of promotion of Hu Jintao before the 16th Party Congress en route to assuming the trifecta of state, party, and military leadership positions at the 18th Party Congress in 2012. This article re-examines the assumptions of the promotion forecasts, analyzes the possible reasons for Xi's failure to be promoted, and offers alternative scenarios.

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Recap: Transition from Jiang to Hu at the 16th Congress's Fourth Plenum in September 2004

As I explored in *CLM 5*, Jiang Zemin retained his chairmanship of the Central Military Commission at the 16th Party Congress meeting in 2002, while handing over the CCP general secretaryship and later the state presidency to Hu Jintao.¹ The negative repercussions of this move were highlighted in *CLM 7*, which documented an internal party dissatisfaction with “two centers” of leadership,² and *CLM 8*, which tracked Hu and Jiang's jockeying for power and influence during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Ming 361 crises.³ Throughout these events, Jiang clearly drew inspiration from Deng Xiaoping's precedents, beginning with his initial partial retirement.

Recall that at the 13th Party Congress in 1987, confident of his preeminence in the system, Deng retired from all formal positions save one, the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission. His logic at the time was clear. Deng retained his position

for two years, relinquishing his party CMC chairmanship at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 13th Central Committee in November 1989 and his state CMC chairmanship at the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh National People's Congress in March 1990.⁴

On 19 September 2004, Xinhua News Agency published the text of Jiang's letter to the Politburo, dated 1 September 2004, requesting permission to resign as chairman of the Central Military Commission. In a continuing paean to Deng Xiaoping's legacy, the first paragraph of Jiang's letter used the same wording that Deng's resignation letter used in 1989. Jiang cited a number of reasons for resigning, including "the long-term peace and stability of the party and state," as well as a desire to achieve "the institutionalization, standardization, and proceduralization of the succession of new high-ranking party and state leaders."⁵ He claimed to have informed the Central Committee of his desire to retire from all official positions prior to the 16th Party Congress in fall 2002, but cited the "complicated and ever-changing international situation" and the "heavy tasks of national defense and army building" as the reasons why the Central Committee "decided" that Jiang should retain chairmanship of the CMC until the Fourth Plenum of the 16th Congress in fall 2004.⁶ Deflecting the oft-repeated criticism that he retained his military position as a way to retain power and maintain leverage over Hu Jintao, Jiang asserted that he had "always respected and supported the work of the central leadership collective" and was "looking forward to . . . complete retirement from leadership positions."⁷ He also explicitly nominated Hu Jintao to replace him as CMC chairman, complimenting the general secretary as "completely qualified for the post" and insisting that the recentralization of leadership over the military under the current general secretary of the CCP was "good for upholding the fundamental principle and system of the party's absolute leadership over the army."⁸

Accounts of the enlarged September 2004 CMC meeting at which the handover was formalized offered other insights.⁹ In his speech, Jiang insisted that the "three-in-one leadership system under which the party general secretary, state president, and CMC chairman is the same person" was "not only necessary" but the "most appropriate method." Jiang also elaborated on the rationale for his retention of the CMC chairmanship at the 16th Party Congress. In having employed what he described as a "tight grasp," Jiang claimed to have wanted to "settle some major matters in the buildup of the armed forces, to lay a better foundation, and to create more complete conditions for handing over the duties."¹⁰ Jiang also had even kinder words for the recipient of the handover, Hu Jintao, describing him as "in the prime of life," "outstandingly effective," "young and energetic," "meticulous," and possessing "rich leading experience" and "excellent qualifications."¹¹ Jiang closed his speech with some personal emotional reflections about the previous 15 years, and a list of "hopes" for the future of the armed forces, including the party's absolute control over the military, a "revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics," and defense of national sovereignty, among others.¹² For his part, Hu Jintao was gracious in victory, complimenting Jiang as someone who "is able to stand tall, see far, and think deeply." He thanked Jiang for his "historic contributions," in particular his role in "systematizing, standardizing, and providing procedures for the handover of senior leadership positions from old to new in our party, our government and our army."¹³ Indeed, Hu referred to Jiang's retreat from public life as

a “glorious example of exemplary conduct and nobility of character and profound breadth of vision.”¹⁴

Fast Forward: Xi Jinping and the 17th Congress’s Fourth Plenum, September 2009

Given Hu’s comments in 2004 about “systematizing” and “standardizing” the handover process, it was natural for the China-watching community to expect a similar process for Hu’s handover of power to a successor at the 18th Party Congress. Indeed, the 17th Party Congress seemed to follow a script, with Xi Jinping appointed as the understudy to Hu in two of the three key positions. While Hu continued to serve as state president, Xi was appointed vice president, presumably to justify his introductions to foreign leaders. While Hu remained General Secretary of the Communist Party, Xi was promoted to be head of the CCP Secretariat, which offered an unparalleled education in the processes and procedures of party-building and governance. Like Hu, Xi was not appointed to the Central Military Commission right away, but outside observers immediately speculated that Hu would eventually elevate Xi to a CMC vice-chairman slot at a later plenum. As the Fourth Plenum approached in the fall of 2009, therefore, expectation began to mount that Hu would emulate Jiang and appoint Xi to the CMC at the exact same moment in the CCP political calendar.

Yet the opinion of the majority was wrong and the Plenum came and went without any personnel moves. Why did it not happen? A range of possible explanations have been offered:

Factional politics

To some, the plenum’s outcome can be explained by factional politics, centering on the alleged competition between Hu’s China Youth League (CYL) faction and other competing groups, such as the so-called princelings group, led by Xi Jinping. Leaving aside whether factional politics is even an appropriate model for understanding the current Chinese political scene or whether the identified factional groupings even exist, three related variations of the factional politics explanation for the plenum have appeared:

The first hypothesis holds that Hu Jintao did not want to promote the leader of a competing faction to a senior position in the CMC, preferring someone from his own CYL faction.¹⁵ To support this argument, proponents note that “princelings are heavily represented in the top echelons of the People’s Liberation Army, [while] very few youth league affiliates have attained senior ranks in the defense forces.”¹⁶ Another observer, Professor Hu Xingdou of the Beijing Institute of Technology, averred: “Mr Xi may still receive the promotion after a delay . . . but the delay shows there is some democracy within the party and there are other contestants.”¹⁷ Possible candidates include Wen Jiabao’s heir apparent as premier, Li Keqiang, who is reportedly a member of the CYL faction, and Chongqing party boss Bo Xilai. Professor Hu asserted that “Mr Li, who is remembered at Peking University as being a reformist student leader, is Mr Hu’s

preferred successor, but was bumped sideways two years ago after an apparent compromise deal between Mr Hu, former president Jiang Zemin and power broker Zeng Qinghong.”¹⁸ The approved Resolution from the Fourth Plenum seemed to support the idea of diversity in selection, citing Deng Xiaoping’s mantra about “grooming cadres from the five lakes and four seas.” “We must broaden our perspectives in picking cadres [for promotion],” the Resolution said. “We must broadly open up channels for nurturing cadres.” Willy Lam describes this language as a “not-so-subtle critique of President Hu’s penchant for boosting the political fortunes of cronies and associates within the CYL system.”¹⁹ The primary weakness of this explanation is the attendant difficulty of undoing all of the other intricate political compromises that created the current division of labor between Xi and Li. In addition, it is unclear why Hu would want to undermine Xi, other than pure factional malice. It is difficult to argue that Xi has not been doing a great job, particularly given the relatively flawless success in running the Beijing Olympics and the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the CCP. At the same time, he is also allegedly the head of the Party’s Stability Preservation Office, which has struggled to stem the growing tide of social unrest in China.²⁰

A second version of this argument asserts that Hu still intends to eventually promote Xi to all three positions, but wants to boost the strength of his CYL loyalist, Li. According to Willy Lam, “Hu has hoped to delay Xi’s induction to the military commission so as to allow Li, a former party boss of the Youth League, time to build up a power base at the top.”²¹ Lam buttresses this argument by describing the recent riots in Xinjiang and Tibet as a setback to the CYL faction, since the party secretaries of those provinces, Wang Lequan and Zhang Qingli respectively, are longtime mainstays of Hu’s power base.²² Hu may be feeling pressure to sack Wang in particular (the mayor and police chief of Urumqi have already been cashiered), and therefore needed to husband his political capital to protect powerful subordinates. As a result, the Xi promotion issue was shelved pending further “internal consultation.”²³

A third factional hypothesis argues that the move actually reflects Hu’s strength in pushing back against allies of his predecessor, Jiang Zemin. An article in *The Age* cites a “Beijing source” who supports Mr. Hu, saying that “the events showed the President was gaining greater control over the 200-member Central Committee and was taking a stand against allies of former president Jiang Zemin,” which allegedly includes Xi.²⁴ This source expressed the hope that “there will at least be hope for change which, rather than so-called ‘stability,’ is what the people want today.”²⁵

Distraction

Students of inner party politics hypothesize that Hu did not promote Xi at the Fourth Plenum out of concern that the personnel move would distract from the critically important “party building” work at the meeting, and that Xi is secure in his position as heir apparent. This argument was given significant weight when a high-ranking party theoretician, Wang Changjiang, director general of the Central Party School’s department of education and research on party building, made authorized comments about the situation at a press conference immediately following the plenum:

At the plenum, there was no reflection of personnel changes related to the party's leadership of the military, because this was not included in the agenda for discussion . . . But there will be personnel changes at some point.²⁶

Further supporting this hypothesis is the fact that only Hu and Xi made major speeches at the four-day meeting. While Hu read out much of the "Resolution on certain major questions about strengthening and improving party construction under the new situation," Xi immediately followed Hu and gave a detailed explanation regarding how this resolution was drafted. Outside observers point to this sequence as a time-honored CCP tradition, symbolically signifying Xi's growing clout.

A less noble variant of this argument posits that one of the main thrusts of party building reform is cleaning up corruption in the Party ranks, especially among the children of the elite leadership. Hu is particularly vulnerable to these criticisms, as his son Hu Haifeng was embroiled in high-profile corruption allegations in Namibia, and all news of the scandal has been suppressed in the media and on the Internet. This turn of events, along with the endemic corruption in the system, perhaps compelled Hu to delay promotion for Xi, who is the son of a Party elder, Xi Zhongxun.²⁷

Robert's Rules of Order

There are no clauses in the Party constitution outlining the succession process, nor is there any specific mention of appointing the successor leadership to positions on the CMC prior to their anointing at a Party Congress. Some analysts, like the Brookings Institution's Cheng Li, interpreted Mr Xi's failure to win promotion as good news, a sign that "the Communist Party was developing more sophisticated mechanisms for leadership succession."²⁸ Li continued, "You do see checks and balances appearing in the system, there can be no single 'strongman,' and new rules of the game are emerging."²⁹

At the same time, others interpreted the non-decision as further evidence that the CCP political system is not maturing and becoming more predictable. According to Joseph Cheng Yu-shek, of City University, the outcome "makes China's leadership succession procedures less certain and predictable . . . Having no decision [on the appointment] will encourage unnecessary speculation and competition."³⁰

Hu wants to stick around after 2012

Perhaps the non-decision reflects Hu Jintao's desire to relinquish his party and state leadership posts but stay on as CMC Chairman after the 18th Party Congress, much as Jiang Zemin did after the 16th Congress.³¹ Some analysts, such as Victor Shih, speculate that Hu may want even more: "My take is that Hu wants to delay Xi's ascension into the CMC so that he himself can serve another full term as chairman of the CMC before fully retiring at the 19th Party Congress in 2017."³²

Conclusions and Implications

Analysts' confusion over the non-decision to appoint Xi Jinping as CMC vice-chairman is emblematic of the China-watching community's overreliance on past patterns to predict successions, and its desire to finally see the establishment of regularized precedents for leadership transitions. Instead, these incidents remind us that the CCP political system continues to be an evolving work-in-progress, with a mixture of predictable norms and informal, personalized decisions. With this moment now in the past, the next deductive step is to lay out possible scenarios for the future:

Scenario 1: Hu appoints Xi to be CMC vice-chairman at a later plenum, preserving the balance of authority between Xi and Li and enshrining the leadership team at the 18th Party Congress in 2012.

Scenario 2: Xi is not appointed CMC vice-chairman before the 18th Party Congress, but is elevated to all three state, party, and military leadership positions at the 18th Party Congress, joining Li as the new leadership tandem for the next 10 years.

Scenario 3: Xi is elevated to state president and CCP general-secretary at the 18th Party Congress, but Hu retains the CMC chairmanship for a "decent interval" before handing the job over to Xi at a later plenum, just like Jiang Zemin after the 16th Party Congress.

Scenario 4: Xi is promoted to state president and CCP general-secretary at the 18th Party Congress, but Hu retains the CMC chairmanship for the entirety of the term, only relinquishing the post at the 19th Party Congress.

Scenario 5: Xi is thrown overboard at the 18th Party Congress, and a completely different party leader is chosen to hold one, two or three of the top jobs.

Scenario 1 is the safe linear choice, but it is unclear why environmental or factional conditions would be any different at the Fourth Plenum than they were at the Fourth Plenum. Scenario 2 is not implausible, but the resulting lack of time as Hu's military understudy flies in the face of the "training program" that Xi and Li are enjoying in their current deputy positions across the state and party systems, and would raise obvious and unwanted domestic and foreign questions about Xi's ability to adroitly command the PLA. Scenario 4 would very likely be seen internally as an overreach by Hu, driven by personal ambition, damaging to the stated goals of party-building, and thus resisted by other senior leaders. Scenario 5, while not out of the question, would be highly disruptive to the CCP leadership collective. Given the likely internally derived lessons from 4 June, especially the view that the appearance of divisions in the senior leadership encouraged mass protests, makes this scenario fraught with peril. This leaves Scenario 3, which has the advantage of historical precedent and also factors in Hu's possible self-perception of indispensability. There . . . I have made my bet.

Notes

¹ <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20031/jm.html>.

² <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20033/jm.html>.

³ <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20034/jm.html>.

⁴ <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20031/jm.html>.

⁵ “China Publishes Jiang Zemin’s Letter of Resignation,” Xinhua News Agency, 19 September 2004.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cao Zhi, “Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao Attend Expanded Meeting of the Central Military Commission, Deliver Important Speeches,” Xinhua News Agency, 20 September 2004.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The factional argument, not surprisingly, is offered by Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Xi Jinping Climbs the China Party Ladder,” *Asia Sentinel*, 25 September 2009.

¹⁶ See Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Xi Jinping Climbs the China Party Ladder,” *Asia Sentinel*, 25 September 2009.

¹⁷ John Garnaut, “Chinese puzzle: who is Hu’s heir?” *The Age*, 21 September 2009.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “CCP 17th Central Committee Plenum Skips Xi Jinping and Inner-Party Democracy,” *China Brief*, 24 September 2009.

²⁰ Grace Ng, “Puzzle over Hu’s deputy,” *Straits Times*, 20 September 2009.

²¹ See Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Xi Jinping Climbs the China Party Ladder,” *Asia Sentinel*, 25 September 2009.

²² Ibid.

²³ John Garnaut, “Chinese puzzle: who is Hu’s heir?” *The Age*, 21 September 2009.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “China party scholar hints at Xi Jinping promotion,” Reuters, 22 September 2009.

²⁷ See Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Xi Jinping Climbs the China Party Ladder,” *Asia Sentinel*, 25 September 2009.

²⁸ John Garnaut, “Chinese puzzle: who is Hu’s heir?” *The Age*, 21 September 2009.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Cary Huang, “Shock as CCP fails to anoint Xi,” *South China Morning Post*, 19 September 2009.

³¹ See “China’s Xi Not Named to Party Military Commission,” *Bloomberg*, 19 September 2009.

³² Ibid.