

# Splits in the Politburo Leadership?

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Several events in recent months—remarks by Premier Wen Jiabao on political reform, foreign travels of party security chief Zhou Yongkang, and the elevation of Xi Jinping to a key military policy-making post—have prompted conjectures about splits among China’s top leadership. This article assesses the evidence for these speculations.

In some measure, perceptions of splits in the top party leadership have been catalyzed and complemented by impressions among both domestic and foreign observers of intensifying competition within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as it prepares to convene its 18<sup>th</sup> Congress in the fall of 2012. Even though the party leadership will not formally place convocation of the party congress on its agenda until its annual Central Committee plenum in the fall of 2011, politically attuned Chinese and foreign observers are ever more ready—and not always without reason—to read ongoing events and trends as portending implications for the expected leadership transition at the party congress two years hence.

In this context, insistent remarks on the need for “democracy” by Wen Jiabao—in Shenzhen in August and again in an interview with CNN’s Fareed Zakaria while attending the United Nations session in New York City in September—have been read as contrasting starkly with tepid remarks by Hu Jintao on political reform (also made in Shenzhen), and so as indicating a fundamental split on the future of reform between the premier and the CCP’s top leader, and perhaps its broader Politburo leadership as well. Also, travels by internal security chief and Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang have been seen as indicating efforts of a conservative bloc in the party leadership from the security, military, and propaganda sectors to assert itself in PRC foreign policy, an interpretation that may aid in explaining the uneven but persistent evidence of hard-line trends in that arena over the past year and a half. Finally, the appointment of Xi Jinping to the post of vice chairman of the party Central Military Commission (CMC) at the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee’s Fifth Plenum in October, a year after the unexpected failure of the Fourth Plenum to do so, has been seen as the denouement of a prolonged and apparently failed attempt by party General Secretary Hu Jintao to derail Xi’s succession of him as China’s paramount leader in favor of Hu’s crony Vice Premier Li Keqiang.

These are the most plausible interpretations of the recent events described above, or at least the most plausible from among those interpretations that posit leadership conflict in explaining the events and their significance. In one case, however—that of Xi Jinping’s promotion to the CMC—available evidence is inconclusive. And in the other two cases, inferences of leadership conflict are not supported by available evidence.

## Wen Jiabao and Political Reform

In his remarks in Shenzhen on 20 August, Wen underscored the necessity of political reform, according to the official news agency Xinhua:

Wen Jiabao pointed out that the nature of a long duration of the initial stage of socialism has required us to unswervingly push forward reform and opening up. Our country has made achievements in modernization that have attracted worldwide attention, but our country is still in the initial stage of socialism and will continue to be so for a very long time to come. It is necessary for us to unswervingly struggle for the realization of the magnificent goal of modernization. It is necessary to remove various kinds of structural obstacles to economic and social development and the comprehensive development of man through deepening reform and opening up, liberate and develop the productive forces to the greatest extent, and provide an inexhaustible source of strength for the modernization of the country.

He emphasized the arduousness of perfecting the socialist system and urged us to unswervingly push forward reform and opening up. He said: The basic system of socialism of our country has tremendous advantages, but various mechanisms and structures are not yet sound enough. Only by continuously emancipating the mind, advancing with the times, comprehensively pushing forward reform in a sustained manner will it be possible to build sound and mature socialism with Chinese characteristics. It is necessary to push forward the reform of the economic structure and it is also necessary to push forward the reform of the political structure. Without the guarantee of the reform of the political structure, the achievements made in the reform of the economic structure will be lost and it will be impossible to realize the goal of modernization. It is necessary to protect the people's democratic rights and interests and their legitimate rights and interests; it is necessary to most extensively mobilize and organize the people to manage state affairs and economic, social and cultural affairs according to law; it is necessary to resolve the issue of the excessive concentration of unrestrained power, create conditions for the people to criticize and supervise the government and resolutely punish corruption; it is necessary to build a society with fairness and justice and it is especially necessary to ensure judicial justice, pay attention to protecting and helping the easily vulnerable groups, and enable the people to live with a sense of security and to have confidence in the development of the country. (Xinhua, 21 August 2010)

In an interview with CNN commentator Fareed Zakaria in New York City on 23 September, Wen renewed his stress on the importance of political reform:

ZAKARIA: You have given a series of very interesting speeches in the last few weeks, in the last few months. I was particularly struck by one you gave in Shenzhen, where you said, “along with economic reform, we must keep doing political reform.”

This is a point you made in our last interview, but a lot of people I know in China, Chinese people, say there has been economic reform over the last six or seven years, but there has not been much political reform.

What do you say to people who listen to your speeches and they say we love everything Wen Jiabao says, but we don’t see the actions of political reform.

WEN (through translator): Actually, this is a viewpoint that was put forward by Mr. Deng Xiaoping a long time ago and I think anyone who has a sense of responsibility for his country should have deep thinking about this topic, and put what he believes into action.

I have done some deeper thinking about this topic, since we last met. My view is that a political party after it becomes a ruling party should be somewhat different from the one when it was struggling for power.

The biggest difference should be that this political party should act in accordance with the constitution and the law. The policies and propositions of a political party can be translated into parts of the constitution and the laws through appropriate legal procedures.

All political parties, organizations, and all people should abide by the constitution and laws without any exception. They must all act in accordance with the constitution and laws. I see that as a defining feature of modern political system development.

I have summed up my political ideals into the following four sentences, to let everyone lead a happy life with dignity, to let everyone feel safe and secure, to let the society be one with equity and justice and to let everyone have confidence in the future.

In spite of the various discussions and views in society, and in spite of some resistance, I will act in accordance with these ideals unswervingly, and advance within the realm of my capabilities political restructuring. I would like to tell you the following two sentences to reinforce my case on this, or my view on this point, that is I will not fall in spite of the strong wind and harsh rain, and I will not yield until the last day of my life.<sup>1</sup>

Arguments that Wen's remarks on political reform and the need for democracy both in Shenzhen and to Fareed Zakaria reflected a split between the premier and others in the CCP's top leadership have rested on several inferences:

- Wen's remarks stand out because they depart from the prevailing party line on "political restructuring" in calling for "democracy" consistent with Western understanding of the term;
- the heterodoxy of Wen's remarks is evident because they were censored in China;
- Wen's divergence from the rest of the top leadership is evident from the paltry, passing comments of Hu Jintao, also in Shenzhen, only two weeks later, on 6 September;
- broader leadership endorsement of Hu's views is indicated by a series of authoritative "Commentator Articles" articles endorsing his Shenzhen speech in the party newspaper *People's Daily*, in contrast to the quarantine on Wen's speech; and
- leadership condemnation of Wen's views is evident in commentaries in the party journal *Seeking Truth* and *People's Daily*.

Each of these inferences is unfounded. First, the substance of Wen's comments in Shenzhen and New York City is not new, either in comparison with Wen's own statements in the past or with the prevailing party line on political reform. As the sample of statements appended to this article shows, Wen has made comparable remarks on the necessity of political reform for new progress in economic reform and on the need for advances in "democracy" in the past. Such remarks have become particularly routine in the reports Wen delivers to the annual sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) on the work of the State Council, over which he presides. Nor do his comments deviate from the party line, as indicated by a comparison with the report on the work of the Central Committee delivered by General Secretary Hu Jintao at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 2007, the relevant portions of which are also included in the appendix.

Second, Wen's remarks in Shenzhen were not censored in China. The most extensive account of his Shenzhen statements is from the Xinhua News Agency itself, in its Chinese-language transmission on 21 August. Under Xinhua's headline "Only with Resolute Reform and Opening Will the Country Have a Bright Future," *People's Daily* published that account in full and in pride of place position on front page on 22 August. In addition, the Xinhua account was published in full in several nationally circulating newspapers—including the united front and intellectuals paper *Enlightenment Daily* (光明日报) and *Economy Daily* (经济日报)—and in many provincial party newspapers, including those in Shanghai, Chengdu, and Guangzhou. The single exception to this wide coverage was the PLA newspaper *Liberation Army Daily*, which carried a truncated version of the Xinhua account that excised, among other things, Wen's comments on political reform.



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“沉寂的末梢”变为开放的前沿 南宁综合竞争力快速提升

南宁综合竞争力快速提升，已成为中国“崛起的前沿”。在广西南宁，一个曾经沉寂的末梢，正以惊人的速度变为开放的前沿。...

李克强主持召开座谈会强调 加快保障性住房重大民生工程建好

李克强主持召开座谈会，强调要加快推进保障性住房建设，这是重大的民生工程。座谈会强调，要坚持以人为本，把解决民生问题作为工作的出发点和落脚点。...

我国水电装机二亿千瓦 有力推动能源供应结构调整

我国水电装机容量已突破二亿千瓦，有力推动了能源供应结构的调整。水电作为清洁能源，在保障能源安全、改善生态环境方面发挥着越来越重要的作用。...



番茄采摘机械化

贵州省委主要责任领导赴黔调研 贵州省委书记王敏、省长陈敏等一行，日前赴黔东南州调研，看望慰问各族干部群众。...

温家宝在深圳考察工作时强调 只有坚持改革开放 国家才有光明前途

温家宝总理在深圳考察工作时强调，只有坚持改革开放，国家才有光明前途。深圳作为改革开放的排头兵，要继续发扬敢闯敢试、敢为人先的精神。...

贾庆林在新疆和田与宗教界代表人士座谈时强调 扎实做好新形势下的宗教工作 推进新疆跨越式发展和长治久安

贾庆林在新疆和田与宗教界代表人士座谈时强调，要扎实做好新形势下的宗教工作，推进新疆跨越式发展和长治久安。要全面贯彻党的宗教工作基本方针，坚持我国宗教中国化方向。...

发挥比较优势 转变发展方式 秦皇岛推进旅游产业转型升级

秦皇岛市积极推进旅游产业转型升级，发挥比较优势，转变发展方式。通过加大投入、创新业态，不断提升旅游品质和竞争力。...

云南文化产业突出民族特色

云南文化产业突出民族特色，民族文化成为产业发展的核心竞争力。通过挖掘民族文化底蕴，创新文化产品，推动文化产业高质量发展。...

People's Daily, 22 August 2010 (The Xinhua account of Wen's Shenzhen remarks is in the top right corner.)

It is true that Wen's remarks to Fared Zakaria on 23 September were not reported in China. Xinhua reported the fact of the interview without the substance at the end of a dispatch that also reported Wen's meeting with former president Bill Clinton in New York the same day, merely recounting that Wen had "answered questions on issues including the world's economic situation, China-U.S. relations, China's reforms and development." PRC media, however, do not as a rule report the substance of Chinese leaders' interviews with foreign media. Xinhua's terse report on Wen's interview with Zakaria thus paralleled, for example, its account of Wen's last interview with Zakaria, in New York in September 2008, which also reported only the fact but not the substance of the interview.

Third, the contrast between Wen Jiabao's remarks on political reform in Shenzhen and the passing reference to the need for reform in Hu Jintao's speech on 6 September, also in Shenzhen, does not indicate that Wen and Hu have split over the issue. For one thing, the context of each leader's remarks was fundamentally different. Hu's speech marked the 30th anniversary of the inauguration of Shenzhen and the other special economic zones (SEZs). As such, it was not a recitation of his personal views on the occasion but rather a recital of consensus views of the broader leadership, almost certainly reviewed by the Politburo prior to its delivery. Wen's words, by contrast, were delivered in the course of a routine inspection tour, during which he expounded—as leaders normally do on such tours—views both broadly reflective of the leadership as a whole and on issues directly under his purview within the leadership as they pertain to the particular locale. In this case, Wen addressed issues of both economic and political reform as they pertain to Shenzhen and the other SEZs, questions that fall under his authority as premier. Over the same period, the other members of the Politburo Standing Committee were also undertaking inspection tours of different regions of China and offering guidance on the policy areas that each supervises.

The difference in occasion also accounts for the differences in media treatment of Wen's and Hu's remarks in Shenzhen. Xinhua's account of Wen Jiabao's remarks was typical of its normal treatment of comments made by other Politburo Standing Committee members while making inspection tours of the provinces. Hu Jintao's Shenzhen speech, however, was made to commemorate an important anniversary on behalf of the broader leadership, and so was marked with an editorial in *People's Daily* on 6 September and a series of commentator articles thereafter to facilitate intra-party study of it.

In addition, the elaborate coverage of Wen's Shenzhen remarks in Guangdong media underscored their local relevance and undercuts the argument that they diverged from the views of Hu Jintao. Wen's remarks received heavy treatment in Guangdong media such as the Guangdong party newspaper *Southern Daily* (南方日报), which emphasized their importance for further reform in Shenzhen and in the other SEZs (two of the remaining three are in Guangdong). Wen delivered his remarks in Shenzhen in the presence of Wang Yang, Guangdong party chief and Politburo member, who accompanied Wen throughout his Guangdong tour. As the top party official in Guangdong, Wang presides over the media in the province, and by all accounts he is a close crony of Hu Jintao's.

That Wen's remarks on political reform in Shenzhen and New York do not diverge from the broader leadership consensus on this topic is suggested by the absence of media publicity to contrasting views by any other Politburo leader. Wen does regularly take the topic up, while other members of the Politburo Standing Committee do not. And so Wen's pronouncements on the issue appear unique among the leadership. But that may be better understood in terms of a division of policy labor among members of the Politburo Standing Committee rather than as indicating Wen's isolation from other leaders. That is, Wen regularly addresses issues of "socialist democracy" (referring to the institutions and processes of the PRC state) while "inner-party democracy" issues (involving CCP institutions and processes) are frequently addressed separately by Hu Jintao. Under such a division of policy labor, Wen's reports on the work of the State

Council to the annual NPC sessions have always included a section on “socialist democracy” and associated government reforms since he began delivering them in 2004. Wen of course has a strong role in shaping these annual reports, but they are also subject to prior review and amendment by the full Politburo, as is clear from Xinhua’s reports of Politburo meetings preceding the opening of the annual NPC sessions. As such, they bear the imprint of the entire party leadership, not just of Wen Jiabao.

*“Zheng Qingyuan”*

That Wen’s remarks on political reform in August and September sparked controversy among the broader public in China is without doubt.<sup>2</sup> In particular, liberal intellectuals, as they have often done in the past on the eve of major party and state meetings, took Wen’s remarks as an opportunity to try to press their own agenda in favor of democratizing political reform. Several liberal newspapers and Internet comments called for new steps toward “democracy,” calls that grew louder when Oslo announced in early October that imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo would be the recipient of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize and as the convocation approached of the party Central Committee’s Fifth Plenum, scheduled to review proposals for a new five-year plan. One such call was a letter posted on the Internet and signed by 23 party veterans—including Mao Zedong’s former personal secretary Li Rui—that, without irony, called on the party propaganda authorities to cease censoring the premier’s views on political reform. “What right does the Central Propaganda Department have,” the open letter asked, “to place itself even above the Communist Party Central Committee and above the State Council?”<sup>3</sup>

In that context, on 27 October the party newspaper *People’s Daily* published a front-page commentary under the by-line “Zheng Qingyuan” (郑青原), an evident pseudonym homophonous with a phrase meaning “setting the record straight” (正本清源). The article launched a scathing attack on views calling for Western-style democratizing reforms. Although widely seen as a direct repudiation of Wen Jiabao for his breaking with the party line on the issue of political reform, the “Zheng” article was much more likely an effort by the party leadership together to push back against the far more liberal calls for democracy from liberal intellectuals. For one thing, the article was the third of a five-part series of articles under the hitherto unknown by-line “Zheng Qingyuan” and under the overall heading of “Seizing the Historical Opportunities to Build a Well-Off Society in an All-Round Way,” each of which was dedicated to explicating aspects of the new five-year plan proposal adopted at the Fifth Plenum. On the face of it, a five-article campaign in which only one article seems vaguely relevant to Wen’s comments on political reform seems a peculiar way to chastise an errant premier.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the article did not take to task even indirectly “comrades” in the party holding erroneous views—a usual tactic in intra-party disputes—nor did the article take on any of the specifics of Wen’s views on political reform as enunciated in Shenzhen or New York City (or anywhere previously, for that matter). In its specifics, the article seemed instead aimed at views circulating in the broader public controversy sparked by Wen’s comments. Thus, it explicitly attacked four or five “views,” none of which was evident in Wen’s remarks: (1) that China has had lots of economic reform but no political reform; (2) that in advancing political reform the party’s leading role may be abandoned;

(3) that political reform does not require upholding the socialist system; (4) that political reform need not “adhere to the road of socialist political development with Chinese characteristics”; and (5) that political reform need not proceed “gradually and orderly.” In attacking the fourth target, the article asserts specifically, “we must persistently take our own road and should never mechanically copy the mode of Western political structure or practice such things as multiple parties holding office in rotation and the separation of powers.”

Finally, there has been no indication in succeeding weeks and months that Wen’s remarks on political reform in September and August have hurt his standing in the leadership. He continued normal domestic activities and foreign travel as premier in those months and has done so since, including delivery at the Fifth Plenum of a long report on the proposals for a new five-year plan.

## Zhou Yongkang on the Road

Speculation about possible splits in the top leadership has also been sparked by the recent travels of Zhou Yongkang, the Politburo Standing Committee member who presides over internal security. From 9 to 11 October, Zhou visited Pyongyang, and from 31 October to 2 November he undertook a three-day visit to New Delhi. Foreign travel by China’s top internal security official—particularly to two capitals with which Beijing’s relations are particularly sensitive—struck some observers as out of place. This observation therefore invited the inference that Zhou’s travels were evidence of the insertion of a conservative coalition of internal security, propaganda, and military leaders into the conduct of Chinese foreign relations, a conclusion that lent explanatory value to impressions of a more assertive, hard-line foreign policy in the past two years.

Zhou’s travels to North Korea and India were not, however, a departure from routine. Since his appointment to the Politburo Standing Committee in October 2007, Zhou has traveled to Vietnam, Indonesia, and Australia (October–November 2008), to Sudan and South Africa (November 2009), and to Italy and Norway (June 2010). Luo Gan, who preceded Zhou Yongkang in the internal security slot on the Politburo Standing Committee, also traveled during his tenure. Luo led party delegations to Iceland, Finland, Armenia, and Moldova in September 2003 and to Argentina, Uruguay, and Cuba in December 2005.

The fact is that all members of the Politburo Standing Committee—including those in exclusively internal party roles—engage in foreign travel. For example, Li Changchun, the fifth-ranked Standing Committee member who presides over the party’s propaganda system, led delegations to Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria in March 2008, to Burma and Australia in March 2009, to Japan and the ROK in March–April 2009, to Germany in April 2010, and to Estonia, Montenegro, Ireland, and Iran in September 2010. Similarly, He Guoqiang, head of the party’s internal disciplinary body, led delegations to Cuba, Trinidad & Tobago, Brazil, and Angola in June and July 2008, to Egypt, Spain, and Greece in June 2009, and to Italy, Iceland, Norway, Lithuania, and Turkmenistan in June 2010. In that light, Zhou’s recent foreign travels are not

exceptional and so do not seem to bear out the conjecture that supposedly conservative members of the leadership are injecting themselves into the processes of foreign relations.

Zhou's visit to Pyongyang in October does seem interesting in another light, however. Zhou's delegation was sent to represent Beijing in Pyongyang's celebrations of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers Party (KWP). For the 60<sup>th</sup> KWP anniversary in 2005—a more important anniversary on communist calendars—Beijing had sent a lower-level delegation led by Politburo member Wu Yi. And in 2000, Beijing had sent no delegation at all to mark the KWP's 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary. From that perspective, the Zhou visit to Pyongyang may have been undertaken as a token effort to play up solidarity with Pyongyang in a critical period of tensions on the Korean peninsula and of apparent transition in North Korea's leadership.

## Xi Jinping and the CMC

Finally, the promotion of Xi Jinping as vice chairman of the party CMC at the Fifth Plenum in October invites speculation about leadership controversy over Xi's apparent status as Hu Jintao's successor to the positions of party general secretary, PRC president, and chairman of the party and PRC CMCs in 2012 and after. Such speculation seems warranted only because Xi's promotion was anticipated to take place at the Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in September 2009. But that plenum closed without making any leadership appointments, and subsequent commentary on the plenum offered no explanation as to why Xi was not promoted, contrary to widespread expectations. And so among competing speculations, a last-stage effort by Hu Jintao to derail Xi's candidacy in favor of his own favorite, Politburo Standing Committee member and executive Vice Premier Li Keqiang, was cited as a possible explanation for the delay.

Expectations that Xi would be named to the party CMC at the Fourth Plenum in 2009 were based on the observation that Xi's growing constellation of high-level appointments since the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2007 appeared to replicate precisely the precedents established in the 1990s by Hu Jintao's preparation to succeed Jiang to the top party, state, and military positions in the 2002–2005 period. Xi was thus elevated onto the Politburo Standing Committee and made executive secretary of the party Secretariat at the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee's First Plenum in October 2007 and soon thereafter he was made president of the Central Party School, all posts that Hu Jintao had been given at the 14<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1992. Xi was appointed PRC vice president in March 2008 at the 11<sup>th</sup> NPC, paralleling Hu's appointment to that post in March 1993. After being reconfirmed in those posts in 1997–98, Hu was finally added to the party CMC at the 15<sup>th</sup> Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in 1999. Based on that precedent, therefore, it seemed likely that Xi would be named to the party CMC at the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in 2009. In addition, with a single exception, all high-level leadership changes since 1992 have been made at the fourth plenums of successive Central Committees, in what have seemed mid-term adjustments to the leadership between party congresses.<sup>5</sup> But Xi's promotion to the CMC did not follow the Hu precedent. After the plenum, mid-level party officials—mostly from the Central Party School, over which Xi

presides—were cited in the media pointing out that nothing in the party’s rules requires leadership appointments be made in any particular Central Committee plenum.

Nevertheless, in subsequent months, nothing in Xi’s continuing duties indicated that he had been displaced as presumed successor.<sup>6</sup> As the Fifth Plenum loomed in October 2010, PRC media hinted that Xi would indeed be promoted at the party meeting. The Xinhua-sponsored weekly news magazine *Outlook* (瞭望) cited Central Party School Professor Ye Duchu intimating that the plenum “would involve some leadership changes.”

In the wake of the plenum, on 19 October, the Hong Kong communist newspaper *Wen Wei Po*—often a reliable source of information on internal party affairs not found in the media of the PRC proper—cited observers as stating that Xi’s promotion was part of a broader reshuffle of the military preceding the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in the fall of 2012. Broader changes in the leadership of the PLA’s headquarters departments, services, and military regions have been under way in recent months, and so it is indeed plausible that Xi’s promotion was deferred until these pre-congress adjustments in the military brass began. It is notable in that regard that the only exception to the pattern since 1992 of high-level leadership changes taking place at mid-term fourth plenums of successive Central Committees was in 1995, when the 14<sup>th</sup> Central Committee’s Fifth Plenum promoted two PLA leaders—Chi Haotian and Zhang Wannian—as vice chairmen of the CMC, in anticipation of the retirement two years later of veteran CMC Vice Chairmen Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen at the 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1997.

In addition, there has been no evidence in the public media of resistance in the PLA to Xi’s promotion to the CMC. The revelation in Xinhua’s official profile of Xi after his appointment to the CMC that he had held military posts as political commissar during his tenure as a party and government official in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai followed the precedent of comparable attention by Xinhua to Hu Jintao’s comparable military posts in its profile of him after his appointment to the CMC in 1999. And so the attention to Xi’s previous military posts in the provinces did not reflect a particular effort to play up his military credentials in the face of PLA criticism. Finally, a 21 October commentator article on the Fifth Plenum in the army newspaper *Liberation Army Daily* saluted Xi’s appointment to the CMC as “a significant decision made by the Central Committee and Chairman Hu from the perspective of strengthening national defense construction, army building, and construction of the CMC leadership group.”

In conclusion, while there is no clear evidence demonstrating that there have been leadership splits over the succession of Xi Jinping since the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, neither is there compelling evidence—including the indications that Xi’s promotion to the CMC at the Fifth Plenum is part of a larger reshuffle of the military heading into the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress—to disprove the possibility either.

## Conclusion

Among the three conjectures about splits in the Politburo leadership assessed above, two lack support from available evidence and alternative explanations are far more compelling. In the third case—the circumstances of Xi Jinping’s promotion to the CMC—evidence is inconclusive.

These results do not demonstrate that conflict over power and policy does not exist in China’s leadership. This author believes on first principles—namely, that Chinese leaders are human and so as ambitious, competitive, and differing in outlook and policy preferences as politicians everywhere else—that leadership splits do indeed exist among China’s top leaders. In a context in which the interests of the various contending constituencies in China’s political order have multiplied and become increasingly complex as China’s wealth and power have grown, in which the stakes of leadership decisions have correspondingly increased, and as China’s leaders confront such episodic stresses as the world economic downturn since 2008, the potential for splits among China’s leaders can only have grown.

Nevertheless, China’s leadership under Hu Jintao has functioned as an oligarchic collective that appears to make decisions on the basis of consensus. The policy processes and rules by which the Hu leadership operates were implanted by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, effectively the restoration of an effort to establish collective leadership procedures in the mid-1950s that was derailed thereafter by Mao’s growing antagonism toward his veteran colleagues. The processes and rules evolved under Jiang Zemin’s leadership in the 1990s, and have taken stronger hold under Hu’s leadership in the past decade. They were implanted by Deng and his colleagues in part to inhibit a return to the intense free-for-all factional conflicts that characterized the last two decades of Mao Zedong’s leadership and in part to facilitate governance of a rapidly modernizing country. The necessity of such a collective leadership politics of consensus was reinforced as a lesson in 1989, when months of leadership splits over economic policy led to a paralysis among the leadership in its ability to deal with the demonstrations as they emerged in Tiananmen Square.

As a consequence, leadership differences over power and policy have since been fought out behind a rigorously sustained public façade of leadership unity and discipline. In that context, the notion that the party’s third-ranking leader, Wen Jiabao, would air personal preferences for “Western-style democracy” in opposition to the prevailing views of the rest of the Chinese leadership in an interview abroad with a foreign journalist ought to seem farfetched, given the highly negative precedent set by then party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang breaking party discipline in comparable fashion during the 1989 Tiananmen crisis. Similarly, the public intrusion of the party’s top internal security leader into foreign relations processes ought to invite a measure of skepticism in a context of two decades of leadership discipline in that arena.

The upshot is, therefore, that while splits certainly exist among China’s leaders today, they work themselves out in a significantly different political setting. And so the

premises and methods used to identify them in the good old days of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath—when “left” was left and “sham left” was really “ultra-right”—must evolve in step.

## Appendix: Wen Jiabao on Political Reform

The following are excerpts of past statements on political reform incorporated into State Council reports delivered by Premier Wen Jiabao to successive sessions of the NPC since 2006 and in the report on the work of the 16<sup>th</sup> Central Committee delivered at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress by party General Secretary Hu Jintao in October 2007. Together, they offer an authoritative baseline against which to judge the degree to which Wen Jiabao’s remarks on political reform in Shenzhen on 20 August and in his interview with Fareed Zakaria in New York City on 23 September 2010 departed from the prevailing party line.

### Report on the Work of the State Council to the 11<sup>th</sup> NPC Third Session, delivered by Wen Jiabao, 5 March 2010 (Xinhua, 15 March 2010)

The reforms we are undertaking, including economic and political restructuring and reforms in all other areas are comprehensive. Without political restructuring, it would not be possible for economic restructuring and the modernization drive to succeed. We will develop socialist democracy and effectively safeguard the democratic rights of the people as masters of the country, particularly their right to vote and to stay informed about, participate in, express views on, and oversee government affairs. We will further expand primary-level democracy, strengthen primary-level self-governing bodies, and improve the system of democratic administration at the primary level so that people can better participate in the management of local public affairs. We will follow the rule of law and improve the legal system, particularly laws concerning the standardization and oversight of the exercise of power. We will creatively revise the methods and mechanisms of the government’s legislative work and expand public participation in it.

### Report on the Work of the State Council to the 11th NPC Second Session, delivered by Wen Jiabao, 5 March 2009 (Xinhua, 14 March 2009)

We will strengthen the building of democracy and the legal system. We will actively and soundly push forward the political system reform and develop socialist democracy. We must improve the democratic system, enrich the forms of democracy, expand channels for democracy, and implement democratic elections, decision-making, administration, and supervision according to the law. We must improve the self-governance mechanisms of grassroots masses, expand the scope of self-governance by grassroots masses, improve the system of democratic administration at grassroots levels, and ensure that the masses directly exercise their democratic rights and administer public affairs and undertakings at

grassroots levels in accordance with the law. We will thoroughly carry out propaganda and education on the legal system, strengthen citizenship education, and establish the concept of socialist democracy and rule-by-law, freedom and equality, and equity and justice. We will make overall planning to push forward the building of urban and rural communities, and promote the healthy development of social organizations. We will strengthen the government's work on the legal system, increase transparency and public participation in the government's legislation work, and achieve standardized, fair, and civilized law enforcement.

We will strengthen social management to maintain harmony and stability in the society. We need to pay special attention to safeguarding people's legitimate rights and interests, correctly handle problems among the people, properly resolve their complaints in a timely manner, and resolutely correct all actions that harm the interests of the masses. We will improve the mechanism for mediating, handling, and resolving social tensions and disputes, and guide the people to express concerns related to their interests by reasonable and lawful means. We will follow the system of having leading cadres, especially principal ones, to handle people's letters and receive people's visits in order to serve the people and resolve conflicts. We will improve the early warning system for social stability to actively prevent and properly handle all types of mass incidents. We will launch intensive campaigns to ensure peace and security and maintain law and order through a full range of measures. We will be on high alert for and severely crack down on all kinds of offenses and crimes in accordance with the law to safeguard national security and social stability.

### **Report on the Work of the State Council to the 11th NPC First Session, delivered by Wen Jiabao, 5 March 2008 (Xinhua, 18 March 2008)**

#### **8. Step up the building of a socialist democratic legal system and promote social equality and justice.**

We will deepen the reform of the political system, develop socialist political civilization. We will expand people's democracy, improve the democratic system, and diversify forms of democracy, and expand its channels. We will carry out democratic elections, decision-making, administration and oversight in accordance with the law to ensure the people's rights of knowledge, participation, expression and supervision. We will develop democracy, improve the system of autonomy, expand the scope of autonomy at the grassroots level, strengthen the building of urban and rural communities, bring more transparency to government, village and factory operations, give play to the active role of civic organizations in expanding public participation in government affairs and reflecting public appeals, and improve the autonomy function of society.

We will fully carry out the guiding principle of governing the nation by the rule of law. We will step up government legislation and improve the quality of such legislation. The year, the government will focus on legislation aimed at improving people's

livelihood, promoting social development, conserving energy and resources and protecting the eco-system. The work of government legislation should seek views from various sources. In enacting administrative laws and regulations closely connected with interests of the public, we should in principal release drafts to solicit public opinions. We will rationally define and adjust the limits of administrative law enforcement power, and strengthen oversight and fully implement the responsibility system of law enforcement. We will improve the system of government administration in accordance with the law at the city and county levels. We will ensure that administrative charges are collected in a standardized manner. We will reform and improve the mechanism for the adequate funding for the judiciary system and for law enforcement. We will improve the filing and inspection procedures for rules, regulations and regulatory documents. We will improve the administrative reconsideration system and the administrative reparation and compensation system. We will ensure the work of providing legal services and assistance. We will increase publicity and education concerning the law to create a good social environment for people to consciously study, abide by and apply the law.

We will improve social management. We will step up social organizational development and improve social management mechanism at the grassroots level. We will do a good job of handling petitions and ameliorate the petition system. We will improve the mechanism for mediating social contradictions, properly deal with internal contradictions among the people, and protect their legitimate rights and interests. We will improve the social security system for the prevention and control of crime, strengthen the comprehensive management of social order, and extensively launch campaigns aimed at creating a safe environment. We will reform and intensify neighborhood police work in urban and rural areas and beef up migrant population services and management. We will focus on rectifying prominent social order issues and districts where social order is chaotic, prevent and clamp down on illegal and criminal activities in accordance with law, protect the public lives, properties and safety, ensure overall stability of society, and strengthen the work of national security.

## Report on the Work of the State Council to the 10th NPC Fifth Session, delivered by Wen Jiabao, 5 March 2007 (Xinhua, 17 March 2007)

### 4. We will promote socialist democratic legal system building.

Developing democracy and perfecting the legal system are the intrinsic requirements of the socialist system. The most important thing about building a harmonious society is strengthening democratic legal system building and promoting social fairness and justice. We will actively and steadily promote political system reform and accelerate the democratic political building with Chinese characteristics. It is necessary to perfect the system on protecting the people's democratic rights, and ensuring the people to manage state affairs, economic and cultural undertakings, and social affairs according to the law. We will step up the grassroots autonomous organization building in urban and rural areas. We will expand grassroots democracy and perfect the system of transparency in public affairs, in factory affairs, and in village affairs. We will ensure that the people can directly exercise their democratic rights according to the law. Various levels of

governments are urged to insist on the scientific and democratic decision-making process, protect the citizens' right to information, participation, expression, and supervision.

We will comprehensively promote administration according to the law. In enhancing the government's legislative work, the emphasis should be placed on formulating laws on developing social undertakings, perfecting social protection, enhancing social management, conserving energy resources, and on protecting the ecological environment. We will strengthen and improve administration and law enforcement, and actualize accountability systems in administration and law enforcement. Law enforcement departments must exercise their power and carry out their duties strictly in accordance with purviews and procedures stipulated by law. We will further strengthen administrative supervision. Governments at all levels and their staffs must all take the lead in abiding by the Constitution and laws, and perform their work strictly in accordance with the law. They must consciously accept the supervision of the National People's Congress and its Standing Committee, accept the democratic supervision of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and earnestly listen to the opinions of the democratic parties, industry and commerce unions, personages without party affiliation, and all civic organizations. They must accept the supervision of the news media and the general public, and support the supervision and audit departments independently carrying out their supervisory duties in accordance with the law, thereby strengthening the checks and supervision over the exercise of power, and ensuring that the power invested by the people is used in the public interest. We will launch universal law education in an in-depth manner, and properly undertake the work of administrative reconsiderations, legal service, and legal support. We will continue to push forward judicial restructuring and safeguard judicial impartiality.

We will properly undertake ethnic, religious, and overseas Chinese affairs work, comprehensively implement the Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law, and consolidate and develop an equal, united, mutually helpful, and harmonious socialist ethnic relations. We will comprehensively implement the party's basic guiding principles for religious work, and earnestly actualize the Regulations on Religious Affairs. We will comprehensively implement the party's overseas Chinese affairs policies, and give full play to the unique role of overseas Chinese brethren as well as returned overseas Chinese and their families in promoting the reunification of the Motherland and national rejuvenation.

## Report on the Work of the State Council to the 10th NPC Fourth Session, delivered by Wen Jiabao, 5 March 2006 (Xinhua, 16 March 2006)

### *(8) Strengthening the Development of Democratic Politics and Safeguarding Social Stability*

We need to consolidate and develop the political situation of democracy, solidarity, vitality, stability, and harmony. We will improve the democratic system, enrich the forms of democracy, expand the orderly participation of citizens in politics, and ensure that the people can exercise democratic elections, democratic decision-making,

democratic management, and democratic oversight in accordance with the law. We will comprehensively push forward administration in accordance with the law, strengthen and improve the government's legislative work, with a focus on strengthening legislation in the areas of resource conservation, ecological and environmental protection, employment, social security, handling public contingencies, promoting social stability, and safeguarding market order.

We will improve the mechanisms, procedures, and methods for the public's participation in legislative work. We will actively launch follow-up reviews of the implementation of laws and regulations. We will continue to strengthen specialized supervision such as auditing and oversight work. We will expand comprehensive law education in an in-depth manner. We will offer effective legal services and legal aid so as to provide effective help to people who have difficulty filing litigations. We will implement various judicial restructuring measures, further regulate law enforcement activities, promote judicial impartiality, safeguard judicial authority, and realize strict, impartial, and civilized enforcement of the law.

We will pay close attention to social stability, and promote peace and security in an extensive and in-depth manner. We will correctly handle conflicts in society in the new era, and earnestly actualize all the policies involving the people's interests. We will pay attention to resolving the problems reported by the people and resolving conflicts in a timely manner. We will properly undertake the letters and visits work. We will strengthen and consolidate grassroots political authority, and push forward the development of harmonious communities as well as harmonious villages and townships. We will improve social stability early-warning systems and mechanisms for handling contingencies. We will properly undertake comprehensive law and order management, accelerate the development of prevention and control systems to ensure law and order, and in accordance with the law rigorously crack down on serious violent crimes, economic crimes, and frequent crimes involving encroachment on property, such as theft and robbery. We will strengthen the national security work.

It is the common wish of all ethnic groups throughout the nation to strengthen the solidarity among the ethnic groups, and safeguard the unity of the motherland and social stability. We will comprehensively implement policies relevant to ethnic minorities and related laws and regulations, earnestly actualize the rules promulgated by the State Council for implementing the law on the autonomy of ethnic minority regions, and promote unity, joint effort, and shared prosperity and development among all ethnic groups. We will vigorously cultivate ethnic minority cadres and talents in various areas. We will implement the party's basic guidelines for religious work, and increase the ability to manage religious affairs in accordance with the law. We will further undertake overseas Chinese work properly under the new circumstances.

17th Party Congress Report section on Political Reform, delivered by  
CCP General Secretary on 15 October 2007 (Xinhua English  
translation, 24 October 2007)

*VI. Unswervingly Developing Socialist Democracy*

People's democracy is the lifeblood of socialism. The Party has been consistently pursuing the goal of developing socialist democracy. Since China began its reform and opening up, we have made vigorous yet steady efforts to promote political restructuring, and socialist democracy has demonstrated greater vitality in the country. As an important part of the overall reform, political restructuring must be constantly deepened along with economic and social development to adapt to the growing enthusiasm of the people for participation in political affairs. We must keep to the path of political development under socialism with Chinese characteristics, and integrate the leadership of the Party, the position of the people as masters of the country, and the rule of law. We must uphold and improve the system of people's congresses, the system of multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CPC, the system of regional ethnic autonomy, and the system of self-governance at the primary level of society. All this will promote continuous self-improvement and development of the socialist political system.

In deepening political restructuring, we must keep to the correct political orientation. On the basis of ensuring the people's position as masters of the country, we will expand socialist democracy, build a socialist country under the rule of law and develop socialist political civilization to enhance the vitality of the Party and the state and arouse the initiative of the people. We must uphold the Party's role as the core of leadership in directing the overall situation and coordinating the efforts of all quarters, and improve its capacity for scientific, democratic and law-based governance to ensure that the Party leads the people in effectively governing the country. We must ensure that all power of the state belongs to the people, expand the citizens' orderly participation in political affairs at each level and in every field, and mobilize and organize the people as extensively as possible to manage state and social affairs as well as economic and cultural programs in accordance with the law. We must uphold the rule of law as a fundamental principle and adopt the socialist concept of law-based governance to ensure that all work of the state is based on the law and that the legitimate rights and interests of citizens are safeguarded. We must maintain the features and advantages of the socialist political system and define institutions, standards and procedures for socialist democracy to provide political and legal guarantees of lasting stability for the Party and the country.

**1. Expand people's democracy and ensure that they are masters of the country.** The essence and core of socialist democracy are that the people are masters of the country. We need to improve institutions for democracy, diversify its forms and expand its channels, and we need to carry out democratic election, decision-making, administration and oversight in accordance with the law to guarantee the people's rights to be informed, to participate, to be heard, and to oversee. We must support people's congresses in performing their functions pursuant to law and effectively turn the Party's propositions into the will of the state through legal procedures. We must ensure that deputies to people's congresses exercise their functions and powers in accordance with the law and

maintain close ties with the general public. We propose that both urban and rural areas gradually adopt the same ratio of deputies to the represented population in elections of deputies to people's congresses. We must strengthen the institutions of standing committees of people's congresses and improve their membership composition in terms of intellectual background and age. We will support the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in performing its functions centered on the two major themes of unity and democracy and improve the system of political consultation, democratic oversight, and participation in the deliberation and administration of state affairs. We will incorporate political consultation in decision-making procedures, improve democratic oversight and ensure that the CPPCC participates in the deliberation and administration of state affairs more effectively. The CPPCC is encouraged to improve itself and play its important role in coordinating relations, pooling strengths, making proposals and serving the overall interests of the country. We must ensure equality among all ethnic groups and guarantee the right of ethnic autonomous areas to exercise autonomy pursuant to law. To ensure scientific and democratic decision-making, we will improve the information and intellectual support for it, increase its transparency and expand public participation in it. In principle, public hearings must be held for the formulation of laws, regulations and policies that bear closely on the interests of the public. We need to step up education about citizenship and establish socialist concepts of democracy, the rule of law, freedom, equality, equity and justice. We support trade unions, the Communist Youth League, women's federations and other people's organizations in functioning in accordance with the law and their respective charters, participating in social management and public services and helping protect the people's legitimate rights and interests.

**2.** Develop primary-level democracy and ensure that the people enjoy democratic rights in a more extensive and practical way. The most effective and extensive way for the people to be masters of the country is that they directly exercise their democratic rights in accordance with the law to manage public affairs and public service programs at the primary level, practice self-management, self-service, self-education and self-oversight, and exercise democratic oversight over cadres. Such practices must be emphasized and promoted as the groundwork for developing socialist democracy. We need to improve the dynamic mechanism of people's self-governance at the primary level under the leadership of primary Party organizations, expand the scope of self-governance, and improve the institution for democratic management, with a view to turning urban and rural neighborhoods into communities of social life that are well managed, supported by complete services, and filled with civility and harmony. We must rely wholeheartedly on the working class, improve the democratic management system in enterprises and public institutions with workers' conferences as its basic form and increase transparency in factory affairs to support workers' participation in management and to safeguard their legitimate rights and interests. We need to deepen institutional reforms at the town and township level to strengthen government authorities there and improve the systems for transparency in government and village affairs to bring about effective connection and beneficial interaction between government administration and primary-level self-governance. We also encourage social organizations to help expand the participation by

the public and report on their petitions to improve the self-governance capability of society.

**3.** Comprehensively implement the rule of law as a fundamental principle and speed up the building of a socialist country under the rule of law. The rule of law constitutes the essential requirement of socialist democracy. We must persist in scientific and democratic legislation to improve the socialist law system with Chinese characteristics. We will strengthen the enforcement of the Constitution and laws, ensure that all citizens are equal before the law, and safeguard social equity and justice and the consistency, sanctity and authority of the socialist legal system. We need to carry out government administration in accordance with the law. We need to deepen the reform of the judiciary system, optimize the distribution of judicial functions and powers, standardize judicial practices, and build a fair, efficient and authoritative socialist judiciary system to ensure that courts and procuratorates exercise their respective powers independently and impartially in accordance with the law. We need to improve the overall quality of judicial, procuratorial and public security personnel to ensure that law enforcement is strict, impartial and civilized. We need to step up the education campaign to increase public awareness of law, and promote the spirit of the rule of law, creating a social environment in which people study, abide by and apply laws of their own accord. We must respect and safeguard human rights, and ensure the equal right to participation and development for all members of society in accordance with the law. Party organizations at all levels and all Party members must act under the Constitution and laws on their own initiative and take the lead in upholding the authority of the Constitution and laws.

**4.** Expand the patriotic united front and unite with all forces that can be united. Promoting harmony in relations between political parties, between ethnic groups, between religions, between social strata, and between our compatriots at home and overseas plays an irreplaceable role in enhancing unity and pooling strengths. Acting on the principle of long-term coexistence, mutual oversight, sincerity, and sharing of both good and bad times, we will strengthen our cooperation with the democratic parties, support them and personages without party affiliation in better performing their functions of participation in the deliberation and administration of state affairs and democratic oversight, and select and recommend a greater number of outstanding non-CPC persons for leading positions. Keeping in mind the objective of all ethnic groups working together for common prosperity and development, we must guarantee the legitimate rights and interests of ethnic minorities, and strengthen and develop socialist ethnic relations based on equality, solidarity, mutual assistance and harmony. We will fully implement the Party's basic principle for its work related to religious affairs and bring into play the positive role of religious personages and believers in promoting economic and social development. We encourage members of emerging social strata to take an active part in building socialism with Chinese characteristics. We will conscientiously follow the Party's policy on overseas Chinese affairs and support overseas Chinese nationals, returned overseas Chinese and their relatives in caring about and participating in the modernization drive and the great cause of peaceful reunification of the motherland.

**5.** Accelerate the reform of the administrative system and build a service-oriented government. The administrative reform is an important part of the efforts to deepen China's overall reform. We must lose no time in working out a master plan for it, with the focus on changing functions, straightening out relations, optimizing the setup and raising efficiency, and bring about a system which matches powers with responsibilities, divides work in a rational way, fosters scientific decision-making, and ensures smooth enforcement and effective oversight. We need to improve the government responsibility system and the public service system, promote e-government and strengthen social management and public services. We will accelerate the separation of the functions of the government from those of enterprises, state assets management authorities, public institutions and market-based intermediaries, standardize administrative practices, strengthen administrative law-enforcement agencies, reduce the number of matters requiring administrative examination and approval and standardize such procedures, and reduce government intervention in microeconomic operations. We will standardize the relationship between local departments directly under central government organs and local governments. We will step up our efforts to streamline government organs, explore ways to establish greater departments with integrated functions, and improve the mechanism of coordination and collaboration between government departments. We will downsize and standardize various organs for deliberation and coordination and their working offices, cut down levels of administration, minimize its costs, and address the problems of overlapping organizations and functions and conflicting policies from different departments. We will give overall consideration to the setup of Party committees and governments as well as that of people's congresses and CPPCC committees, reduce the number of their leading positions and strictly control their staffing. We will step up the restructuring of different categories of public institutions.

**6.** Improve the mechanism of restraint and oversight and ensure that power entrusted by the people is always exercised in their interests. Power must be exercised in the sunshine to ensure that it is exercised correctly. We must have institutions to govern power, work and personnel, and establish a sound structure of power and a mechanism for its operation in which decision-making, enforcement and oversight powers check each other and function in coordination. We will improve organic laws and rules of procedure to ensure that state organs exercise their powers and perform their functions and responsibilities within their statutory jurisdiction and in accordance with legal procedures. We will improve the open administrative system in various areas and increase transparency in government work, thus enhancing the people's trust in the government. We will focus on tightening oversight over leading cadres and especially principal ones, over the management and use of human, financial and material resources, and over key positions. We will improve the systems of inquiries, accountability, economic responsibility auditing, resignation and recall. We will implement the intra-Party oversight regulations, strengthen democratic oversight and give scope to the oversight role of public opinion, pooling forces of oversight from all sides to make it more effective.

Democracy will keep developing along with the progress of socialism. In the historical course of developing socialism with Chinese characteristics, Chinese

Communists and the Chinese people will surely advance socialist democracy that is full of vitality.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> CNN transcript of Fareed Zakaria interview with Wen Jiabao, aired 3 October 2010, accessed at <http://archives.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1010/03/fzgps.01.html>.

<sup>2</sup> For broader treatment of this public controversy and other aspects of the reaction to Wen's comments on political reform heading into the Fifth Plenum, see the article by Joseph Fewsmith in this issue, "Political Reform Was Never on the Agenda."

<sup>3</sup> *South China Morning Post* online, 13 Oct 2010.

<sup>4</sup> The five "Zheng Qingyuan" articles appeared in *People's Daily* on 21, 25, 27, and 29 October and 2 November 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See "Xi Jinping and the Case of the Mysterious Succession," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 30 (Fall 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See "The Preparation of Li Keqiang," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 31 (Winter 2010).