

# The Politburo Standing Committee under Hu Jintao

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During Hu Jintao's tenure as general secretary, the Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has operated under a structure intended to promote collective decision-making on the basis of informed deliberation and consensus and to reinforce stable oligarchic rule. This structure is a refinement of top decision-making arrangements first set down in the 1950s, then restored in the early 1980s by Deng Xiaoping, and revised by Hu's predecessor Jiang Zemin. While Hu's presumed successor Xi Jinping is not bound by any explicit provision in the party constitution to replicate the structure and associated policy-making processes of the Hu era, their intended purpose would seem to constrain his freedom to reshape them arbitrarily.

## Structure and Process under Hu Jintao

The Politburo Standing Committee is the CCP's decision-making center on all major policy issues. There is no reliable information about its normal meeting schedule, however, nor are its decision-making processes known. Although the PRC media have routinely reported on meetings of the full Politburo since Hu Jintao became party general secretary in 2002, they almost never report meetings of the Standing Committee.<sup>1</sup> Exceptions have generally been to publicize attention by the top leadership to major disasters, such as the crippling ice storms in 2007 and the earthquake centered at Yushu, Qinghai, in 2010.

Nonetheless, useful insight into the operation of the Politburo Standing Committee can be gained through analysis of its structure, the publicized activities of its members, and its relationship to the broader Politburo. These aspects were likely set in place at the very beginning of Hu's tenure as general secretary. Xinhua's report on the first meeting on 16 November 2002 of the Politburo newly appointed by the 16<sup>th</sup> Central Committee's First Plenum—and the first under Hu's leadership—stated that the meeting “studied issues concerning the division of work in the Politburo” (会议还研究了政治局工作分工…的有关问题). The consistency of patterns in Standing Committee functioning across the Hu Jintao period strongly suggests an effort to establish Standing Committee processes that facilitate balanced and informed decision-making among a collective leadership oligarchy.

As did the Standing Committee appointed in 2002 after the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the Standing Committee appointed in 2007 after the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress has nine members. When the first Hu Politburo Standing Committee was appointed, many observers correctly noted that it was significantly larger than that body had been across the entire reform era, as table 1 bears out.

**Table 1***The Size of the CCP Politburo and Standing Committee, 1982–2011*

| <i>Central Committee</i> | <i>General secretary</i> | <i>Standing Committee</i> | <i>Full Politburo</i> |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 12 <sup>th</sup> (1982)  | Hu Yaobang               | 6 members                 | 25 + 3 alternates     |
| 13 <sup>th</sup> (1987)  | Zhao Ziyang              | 5 members                 | 17 + 1 alternate      |
| 14 <sup>th</sup> (1992)  | Jiang Zemin              | 7 members                 | 20 + 2 alternates     |
| 15 <sup>th</sup> (1997)  | Jiang Zemin              | 7 members                 | 22 + 2 alternates     |
| 16 <sup>th</sup> (2002)  | Hu Jintao                | 9 members                 | 24 + 1 alternate      |
| 17 <sup>th</sup> (2007)  | Hu Jintao                | 9 members                 | 25                    |

Noting that several of the nine members had been promoted into the leadership under the outgoing General Secretary Jiang Zemin, many foreign and Hong Kong observers inferred that the expanded size of the 2002 Politburo Standing Committee reflected an attempt by Jiang to retain influence under the new Hu leadership by packing the body with his Shanghai Gang cronies.

This inference soon seemed in doubt, however, as Hu Jintao did not appear stymied by a Politburo Standing Committee stacked against him. He moved surprisingly quickly to launch new ideological and policy approaches that departed from and in some respects were implicitly critical of the emphasis on high-speed economic growth during the Jiang Zemin years, gaining authoritative endorsement of them by the broader leadership. These initiatives included a new emphasis on “people-centered” policies (2002), the launching of the “scientific development concept” (2003), the broaching of the “socialist harmonious society” idea (2004), and the emergence of the “new socialist countryside” approach (2005). In addition, the retention of a nine-member Standing Committee in 2007, even after the demise of the Shanghai Gang and as Hu consolidated his power at the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, seemed to confirm that the expansion of the Standing Committee in 2002 had not been about factional conflict between Jiang and Hu but rather served other purposes.<sup>2</sup>

That these purposes included facilitation of efficient and effective policy-making is apparent from the breakdown of Standing Committee members’ associated posts and policy responsibilities. As tables 2 and 3 make clear, the nine members of the 2002 and 2007 Standing Committees took on responsibility for the same cluster of major policy sectors. Presumably, each member speaks for his respective policy sector in Standing Committee deliberations. In addition, each member also presides over the relevant Central Committee leading small group (LSG) and so presides over implementation and supervision of Standing Committee decisions among the relevant institutions across the political order.

The concentration of direction of all seven primary Central Committee LSGs in the hands of Politburo Standing Committee members is distinctive in the Hu period and comes at the expense of the party Secretariat, under which the LSGs formerly operated.

*(text continues on p. 4)*

**Table 2***The 16<sup>th</sup> CC Politburo Standing Committee's Division of Policy Work (2002)*

| <i>Member</i> | <i>Other posts held</i>  | <i>Policy sector</i>                       | <i>Leading small group(s)</i>             |
|---------------|--|--|---|
| Hu Jintao     | CCP general secretary, PRC president, CMC chairman                                       | Foreign relations, military affairs        | Foreign Affairs; Taiwan Affairs           |
| Wu Bangguo    | Chairman, National People's Congress   | Legislative affairs                        |   |
| Wen Jiabao    | Premier, State Council   | Government administration                  | Director, Finance & Economy               |
| Jia Qinglin   | Chairman, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference                             | United front affairs                       |   |
| Zeng Qinghong | Executive secretary, CC Secretariat; president, Central Party School; PRC vice president | Party apparatus; Hong Kong & Macao affairs | Party-building; Hong Kong & Macao Affairs |
| Huang Ju      | Executive vice premier, State Council  | Finance and economy                        | Deputy director, Finance & Economy        |
| Wu Guanzheng  | Chairman, Central Discipline Inspection Commission                                       | Party discipline                           |   |
| Li Changchun  |  | Ideology and propaganda affairs            | Ideology & Propaganda                     |
| Luo Gan       |  | Internal security                          | Politics & Law Committee                  |

**Table 3***The 17<sup>th</sup> CC Politburo Standing Committee's Division of Policy Work (2007)*

| <i>Member</i> | <i>Other posts held</i>  | <i>Policy sector</i>                       | <i>Leading small group(s)</i>             |
|---------------|--|--|---|
| Hu Jintao     | CCP general secretary, PRC president, CMC chairman                                       | Foreign relations, military affairs        | Foreign Affairs; Taiwan Affairs           |
| Wu Bangguo    | Chairman, National People's Congress   | Legislative affairs                        |   |
| Wen Jiabao    | Premier, State Council   | Government administration                  | Director, Finance & Economy               |
| Jia Qinglin   | Chairman, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference                             | United front affairs                       |   |
| Li Changchun  |  | Ideology & propaganda affairs              |   |
| Xi Jinping    | Executive secretary, CC Secretariat; president, Central Party School; PRC vice president | Party apparatus; Hong Kong & Macao affairs | Party-building; Hong Kong & Macao Affairs |
| Li Keqiang    | Executive vice premier, State Council  | Finance & economy                          | Deputy director, Finance & Economy        |
| He Guoqiang   | Chairman, Central Discipline Inspection Commission                                       | Party discipline                           |   |
| Zhou Yongkang |  | Internal security                          | Politics & Law Committee                  |

As table 4 shows, in the Jiang Zemin period, the Secretariat included some members who worked in the finance and economy, internal security, and military sectors. All of these individuals served concurrently on the Politburo, and most served on the relevant LSGs as well. Since 2007, however, as table 5 shows, the Secretariat has consisted only of members who focus on party affairs.

**Table 4**  
*The 15<sup>th</sup> Central Committee Secretariat (1997)*

| <i>Member</i> | <i>Other posts held</i>  |
|---------------|--|
| Hu Jintao     | Politburo Standing Committee; Executive secretary, Secretariat                           |
| Wei Jianxing  | Politburo Standing Committee; Deputy Secretary, Central Discipline Inspection Commission |
| Ding Guan'gen | Politburo; Director, CC Propaganda Department  |
| Zhang Wannian | Politburo; Vice chairman, Central Military Commission                                    |
| Luo Gan       | Politburo; State councilor, internal security  |
| Wen Jiabao    | Politburo; Vice premier, finance & economy   |
| Zeng Qinghong | Politburo alternate; Director, CC General Office   |

**Table 5**  
*The 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee Secretariat (2007)*

| <i>Member</i> | <i>Other posts held</i>  |
|---------------|--|
| Xi Jinping    | Politburo Standing Committee; Executive secretary, Secretariat |
| Liu Yunshan   | Politburo; Director, CC Propaganda Department                  |
| Li Yuanchao   | Politburo; Director, CC Organization Department                |
| He Yong       | Deputy Secretary, Central Discipline Inspection Commission     |
| Ling Jihua    | Director, CC General Office                                    |
| Wang Huning   | Director, CC Policy Research Office                            |

The object of the Politburo Standing Committee's structure and division of policy labor under Hu Jintao thus appears to have been to make that body responsible both for making effective decisions in all major policy areas and simultaneously for supervision and coordination of those policy decisions. By incorporating the heads of the major hierarchies in the political order—the state parliament and executive branch, the military, the umbrella united front body, and the CCP itself, together with the leaders presiding over the economy, propaganda, internal security, and foreign and Taiwan affairs—the Standing Committee members represent all major policy areas. Subordination of the main LSGs to the relevant members also makes the Standing Committee the core operational group in the leadership.

## The Standing Committee and the Full Politburo

The structure and processes of the Politburo Standing Committee under Hu Jintao have also appeared to reflect the goal of reinforcing consensus-based decision-making under oligarchic collective leadership. On one hand, they appear aimed at limiting the ability of the general secretary to acquire dictatorial powers over the rest of the leadership, as Mao had enjoyed in the 1960s and 1970s and as Stalin had in Soviet politics. On the other hand, they also appear to be aimed at inhibiting any one leader or bloc of leaders from any constituency from asserting dominance over the others.

These goals are implicit not only in the Standing Committee structure sketched above but also in the relationship of the Standing Committee to the broader Politburo and the status of the general secretary presiding over both bodies. Thus:

- Hu Jintao has made explicit the subordination, in principle at least, of the Standing Committee to the full Politburo and in turn the subordination of the Politburo itself to the Central Committee. Since 2004, Xinhua has published accounts of Hu delivering reports as a matter of routine on the work of the Politburo to successive Central Committee plenums. Similarly, Xinhua has on occasion noted that the full Politburo reviewed the work of the Standing Committee in the course of reporting on Politburo meetings.
- The standing of the general secretary as first among equals among the rest of the membership of the Standing Committee and the full Politburo is reflected in media reference to Hu Jintao not as “core” leader of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committees but simply as party general secretary. During his 1989–2002 tenure as general secretary, Jiang Zemin was constantly referred to as “core” of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Central Committee leaderships. In addition, none of the new ideological departures that have emerged since Hu became general secretary—for example, the emphasis on “people-centered” policies, the “scientific development concept,” or the “socialist harmonious society” ideal—have been described as his personal intellectual property. They have instead been routinely attributed to the “collective wisdom” of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee leaderships.
- Efforts also appear to have been made to balance representation on the Politburo of major institutional constituencies—the party apparatus, organs of state, and the provinces—and to limit representation from among the security institutions, including the PLA. Leaving aside the four heads of the major hierarchies (Hu Jintao, Wu Bangguo, Wen Jiabao, and Jia Qinglin), the current Politburo membership breaks down into institutional constituencies, as shown in table 6. Membership of the 16<sup>th</sup> Politburo broke down into identically balanced institutional groupings. The Soviet leadership used a similar system of institutional balancing in the Brezhnev period. As in the Soviet case, this balancing appears intended to reinforce collective leadership among the Politburo oligarchy by inhibiting any single sector from overwhelming the interests of the others and by inhibiting any single leader—and especially the general secretary—from using

any single group as a base of power to assert dominance over the rest of the leadership collective. The constrained representation on the Politburo of the PLA—which has since 1987 been limited to two or fewer members—seems to be aimed particularly at limiting the general secretary from using the armed forces as a base of dictatorial power as Mao had done.

**Table 6**

*Representation of Institutional Constituencies on the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee Politburo (2007)*

| <i>Party apparatus</i> | <i>State organs</i> | <i>Regional</i> | <i>Military/Security</i> |
|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Li Changchun           | Li Keqiang          | Wang Lequan     | Zhou Yongkang            |
| Xi Jinping             | Wang Zhaoguo        | Liu Qi          |                          |
| He Guoqiang            | Wang Qishan         | Wang Yang       | Gen. Xu Caihou           |
| Wang Gang              | Hui Liangyu         | Zhang Gaoli     | Gen. Guo Boxiong         |
| Liu Yunshan            | Liu Yandong         | Yu Zhengsheng   |                          |
| Li Yuanchao            | Zhang Dejiang       | Bo Xilai        |                          |

## Past Precedents

The Standing Committee's structure and division of policy labor under Hu Jintao reflects a longer evolution that began in the mid-1950s in the Standing Committee's role. The 1945 Seventh Party Congress departed from previous party institutional precedent by not appointing a Politburo Standing Committee, relying instead on a five-man Secretariat under Mao Zedong's leadership to guide policy through the Chinese civil war and through the early years of coalition government in the People's Republic after 1949. The Eighth Party Congress in 1956 established a new leadership structure that was intended to provide for balanced and comprehensive policy-making over a regime that by 1956—following the completion of collectivization of the economy and the establishment in 1954 of fully socialist government institutions—confronted an agenda of stable governance and economic modernization.

This new structure provided for a restored Politburo Standing Committee under Mao's leadership and a party Secretariat under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, concurrently a member of the Standing Committee. Under this arrangement, the Politburo Standing Committee was supposed to provide overall direction for policy decisions, while the Secretariat managed the specifics of policy-making. The full Politburo was to have little direct impact on policy-making and in fact appears to have met only occasionally under this structure. In step with this, the first Central Committee LSGs were established in 1958.<sup>3</sup> These new leadership processes broke down as leadership conflict festered in the late 1950s and the early 1960s in the wake of the Great Leap Forward and were abolished altogether in 1966 with the onset of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

With the launching of the reform era in the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping sought to restore the leadership processes that had been established at the Eighth Party Congress

but left by the wayside thereafter. Under Deng's direction, the party restored first the Secretariat—in 1980, with Hu Yaobang in charge—and then, at the 12<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1982, a leadership system that incorporated broad policy guidance under a Politburo Standing Committee and policy implementation under the Secretariat was brought back, this time with Hu Yaobang formally in presiding over both. Over the next few years, that structure evidently failed, as one of the charges levied against Hu Yaobang on his removal as party general secretary in 1987 was abusing the powers of the Secretariat at the expense of the prerogatives of the Politburo and its Standing Committee.

The leadership structure that emerged from the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress later in 1987 showed the beginnings of several features that played out through the Jiang years and reached current maturity under Hu Jintao. These included:

- A severely downgraded Secretariat—reduced from 12 secretaries in 1982 to four in 1987. The Secretariat expanded somewhat under Jiang Zemin, to five in 1992 and seven in 1997, and to seven in 2002 during Hu's first term. But it has not regained the prominent role intended for it in 1956 and again in 1980–82; in fact it today appears at a nadir in relevance.
- Deliberate steps toward balancing of institutional constituencies emerged with the 13<sup>th</sup> Central Committee Politburo in 1987, including for the first time since the Cultural Revolution four regional party chiefs among the Politburo members and PLA representation limited to one.
- PRC media began routinely reporting consecutively numbered meetings of the Politburo. In addition, among a broader package of political reforms enumerated by General Secretary Zhao Ziyang in his political report to the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, new steps were taken to regularize leadership decision-making and reporting to the Central Committee.

From this perspective, the leadership structures that Hu Jintao has installed across his tenure as party leader are not dramatic departures from past practice that he pioneered. They are rather the consequence of longstanding efforts by Hu's predecessors to facilitate effective leadership over a rapidly changing country and an emerging great power and to inhibit the recurrence of another episode of disastrous leadership as occurred under Mao Zedong.

## Implications for Xi Jinping

No CCP constitutional provision or publicized party regulation explicitly constrains Xi Jinping, Hu Jintao's successor apparent, from altering the leadership structure and processes, including those of the Politburo Standing Committee, deployed by Hu Jintao. They do, however, provide a body of precedents and practice that Xi cannot arbitrarily discard. The contours of the Standing Committee's structure and associated procedures, together with its relationship to the broader Politburo and political system, will not become visible until the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and its aftermath. But in the meantime, we

may surmise that there will be both policy consequences and political implications to the degree that Xi either embraces or alters the Hu leadership systems. For example:

- Raising or lowering the number of Standing Committee members would have immediate implications for the division of policy labor among them. Arguably, perceptions of a need to address new major issues that the Hu system of nine members has not effectively managed could reasonably drive such a revision. But given the seeming comprehensiveness and balance of the cluster of policy packages now managed by the Standing Committee, it is difficult to imagine what those issues may be.
- Appointments to the Politburo Standing Committee under Hu Jintao have demonstrated a strong emphasis, though not complete displacement of other considerations, on representation of the major policy sectors and relevant experience on the part of the appointees. From that perspective, party Propaganda Department chief Liu Yunshan, a career propaganda official, and Meng Jianzhu, currently state councilor for internal security, would seem the odds-on candidates for Standing Committee slots presiding over those policy sectors. To the extent that these criteria prevail, Xi's latitude to make his own choices diminishes.<sup>4</sup>
- Based on the presumption that assertive behavior by Beijing in the past two years on several foreign relations fronts has been driven by a restive PLA inserting itself in leadership politics, some foreign and Hong Kong observers have speculated that addition of a PLA leader to the Politburo Standing Committee is being considered in the run-up to the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. From the perspective of longstanding efforts to build stable and effective leadership processes, however, this seems an unlikely possibility. On one hand, addition of a PLA leader to the Standing Committee would constitute a severe criticism of the ability of the general secretary to reflect PLA interests in the collective leadership and likely elevate concerns among what has been an almost completely civilian Politburo leadership about PLA intrusiveness in party politics. On the other hand, if the added PLA general were perceived to be closely associated with the general secretary, it would immediately raise anxieties among the rest of the leadership about the ambitions of the general secretary.
- For an oligarchic collective leadership to function well, personality and personal style undoubtedly matter. In that regard, speculation about the candidacy of Bo Xilai, the flashy party chief in Chongqing, may be ill-founded. Bo's well-established tendency of grandstanding and playing to foreign media reportedly rubs many party leaders the wrong way and may strike those making selections for the upcoming Xi leadership collective as unsuitable characteristics in an individual expected to live up to the standards of discipline and conformity that members of the Hu leadership group have displayed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For most of the period since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, PRC media did not report on meetings of the Politburo or its Standing Committee on a current basis. Following the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1987, under the tenure of Zhao Ziyang as general secretary, Xinhua began reporting meetings of the Politburo in numbered sequence, a practice that continued until Zhao's removal and replacement by Jiang Zemin in June 1989. Xinhua reporting on Politburo meetings ceased thereafter until restored by Hu Jintao in November 2002. See "Hu Jintao and the Party Politburo," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 9 (Winter 2004).

<sup>2</sup> On Hu's careful but surprisingly rapid departure from Jiang's politics immediately after becoming general secretary, see Joseph Fewsmith, *China After Tiananmen*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge University Press: 2008), 242–254. On the same topic and on the relevant implications of the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, see Alice Miller, "Globalization and Governance under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao," in Roderick MacFarquhar, ed., *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Cambridge University Press: 2011), forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> On the establishment and evolution of the LSGs, see "The Central Committee's Leading Small Groups," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 26 (Fall 2008).

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis that pursues this logic to ruthless and ridiculous extremes, see "The 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee Politburo: A Quixotic, Foolhardy, Rashly Speculative, but Nonetheless Ruthlessly Reasoned Projection," *China Leadership Monitor*, No.33 (Summer 2010).