

Hu Jintao and the Party Politburo

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Publicity attending the recent party Central Committee plenum and other media attention over the past year have shed light on the operations of the party's top decision-making body, the Politburo, under party General Secretary Hu Jintao's leadership. Much of the picture of Chinese leadership decision making remains dim, but the recent publicity has illuminated the formal aspects of Politburo routines and procedures in small but still significant ways. This publicity also permits tentative inferences about the dynamic of power in the Politburo and its Standing Committee and perhaps about Hu Jintao's personal aims in pressing institutional reform in the Politburo and beyond.

Hu Jintao Report on Politburo Work

The most recent publicity in People's Republic of China (PRC) media on the activities of the party Politburo was the attention given to a formal report on the work of the Politburo that was delivered by the party's top leader, General Secretary Hu Jintao, to the 16th Central Committee's Third Plenum, which convened in Beijing on October 11–14, 2003. The report itself, which Hu delivered on the plenum's opening day, has not been made public. Since the plenum, according to an account in the independent Hong Kong newspaper *Economy Daily* (*Ching-chi jih-pao*), the report has been circulated in internal party channels in various full or abridged formats, and at least parts of its text may be publicized later, judging by past practices.

That Hu would deliver a report on the Politburo's work since the November 2002 16th Party Congress was first announced publicly in an August 11 account by the official Xinhua News Agency of a Politburo meeting that day that set the schedule and agenda for the Third Plenum. Since then, the Hu report to the plenum has been described in PRC media commentary leading up to and following the plenum as "unprecedented"; it is viewed as a new step taken by the Hu leadership to enhance transparency and accountability in the affairs of the top leadership, a step that other levels of party and government should emulate.

Such commentary has distinguished past instances of the top party leader having made speeches at Central Committee plenums and central work conferences from Hu's report to the October plenum. Such speeches as Mao Zedong's self-criticism for errors during the Great Leap Forward at the January 1962 "7,000 cadres" conference, Deng Xiaoping's remarks on "liberating thought" at the watershed central work conference in November–December 1978, and Jiang Zemin's speech to the 13th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in June 1989 upon taking the post of general secretary offered the views of the top leader on major themes discussed at the meetings. In contrast, Hu's report to the October plenum parallels the political

report on the work of the Central Committee that has been delivered in the post-Mao period to party congresses by the general secretary. As such, Hu's report on the Politburo's work to the Third Plenum represented a consensus document of the full Politburo reporting to the superior body that elected it, not just a recitation of his personal views, in the same way that the general secretary's report to party congresses is a consensus document of the outgoing Central Committee to the congress that elected it, not a speech reflecting solely the general secretary's opinions. The intent of instituting a process of Politburo reporting to plenums of the Central Committee, media commentary has underscored, is to make explicit the Politburo's accountability to the Central Committee and thereby clarify the hierarchy of authority at the top level of the party. This mechanism of Politburo accountability, commentary has stated, enhances the processes of inner-party democracy called for by the 16th Party Congress and inaugurated under Hu Jintao's leadership.¹

Other Attention to the Politburo

As traced in previous issues of *CLM* since the 16th Party Congress, PRC media have publicized meetings of the full Politburo, sessions of its nine-member Standing Committee, and "study sessions" of the Politburo devoted to topical issues. Since the party congress, Xinhua News Agency has reported on a current basis a total of 12 Politburo meetings and nine study sessions. The dates and reported business of these meetings and study sessions are listed in tables 1 and 2. In addition, Xinhua has twice reported on a current basis meetings of the Politburo's Standing Committee—the first on December 12, 2002, on aiding China's poor, and the second on April 17, 2003, on the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis.

The Xinhua accounts of Politburo meetings are brief. They describe issues that the Politburo discussed, draft documents under consideration, and in general terms, decisions taken at the meeting. The accounts do not list those in attendance, although presumably in most cases only Beijing-based Politburo members were present. That the Xinhua accounts do not list the full agendas of the meetings is clear from the statement in many cases, usually at the end, that the meeting discussed "other matters."

Xinhua accounts of the nine Politburo study sessions describe the topic under discussion in each case and list the academic specialists who were present to brief the Politburo on the topic. In each case, the Xinhua dispatches report Hu Jintao giving a speech to the session on how the topic under study relates to ongoing party work.

Politburo Schedule

Before the 16th Party Congress, PRC media had routinely reported sessions of the Politburo only during the politically turbulent year following the 13th Party Congress in 1987. In

that period, Xinhua carried occasional, brief accounts of meetings of the Politburo under the leadership of then-general secretary Zhao Ziyang. Xinhua did not report all Politburo meetings over the course of the year. However, those meetings that were reported were numbered as part of a series, thereby indicating the total number of meetings since the party congress. On September 2, 1988, for example, Xinhua reported the 13th Central Committee Politburo's 11th meeting.

It is impossible to be certain, but the 12 recently publicized Politburo meetings may be a complete list of all Politburo meetings since the 16th Party Congress, or perhaps nearly so. With 11 meetings in the course of the first year following the party congress (the 12th falls in the second year), Politburo members convened at a rate of nearly once a month. PRC media have not referred in the course of reporting other events to any meetings of the Politburo other than those publicized on a current basis by Xinhua News Agency. Intriguingly, the total of 11 publicized meetings in the year since the 16th Party Congress is the same as the number of meetings indicated to have been held in the year between the 13th Party Congress in October 1987 and the 13th Central Committee's landmark Third Plenum in September 1988.

By contrast, it is clear that the two meetings of the Politburo Standing Committee publicized on a current basis by Xinhua during the past year do not constitute a complete listing of the meetings of that body. A long Xinhua report on November 9, 2003—on the drafting process of the long, 42-point “decision” on economic reform adopted at the Third Plenum—recalled three meetings of the Politburo Standing Committee that had not previously been reported by Xinhua. Each of those three sessions—on July 4, July 31, and October 13—was convened to review successive drafts of the reform decision, whose drafting proceeded under the “direct leadership” of the Standing Committee. The last of these three meetings, in fact, was convened during the course of the plenum to review the final draft of the decision before it was presented for a vote on the plenum's last day. In that light, it seems likely that the Politburo Standing Committee under Hu's leadership meets far more frequently than the full Politburo.

It is clear from the list of Politburo meetings over the past year that there has been no single day of the week or month on which the Politburo meets as a matter of routine. Of 12 meetings, six occurred on Mondays, one on Tuesday, none on Wednesday, one on Thursday, three on Fridays, and one on Saturday, but never on Sunday. In most cases, the study sessions convened on the same day on which the Politburo convened its working meetings.

With the exception of the Xinhua reporting on Politburo meetings in the 1987–88 period, PRC media since 1949 have been virtually silent about the schedule of the Politburo and its Standing Committee. Occasionally, however, Chinese leaders have told foreign visitors details of the Politburo's operations. In July 1984, for example, then-premier Zhao Ziyang told U.S. China-watcher A. Doak Barnett that neither the Politburo nor its Standing Committee met regularly in the early 1980s and that instead the party Secretariat was the key locus of decision making.² In that period, however, the Secretariat under then-general secretary Hu Yaobang was unusually large, and the Politburo Standing Committee included several powerful senior

party veterans. When Hu was demoted from the post of general secretary in January 1987, he was accused of having abused his powers by using the Secretariat to bypass decisions that ought to have been taken to the Politburo and its Standing Committee. In 1989, Hu Qiaomu, who served on the Politburo from 1982 to 1987, intimated to a group of China specialists in Washington, D.C., that since the 1987 13th Party Congress the Politburo had met about once a month.³ In 2001, then-general secretary Jiang Zemin told a visiting Japanese delegation that the Politburo Standing Committee met once a week.⁴ These accounts lend support to the inference that, under Hu Jintao's leadership, the Politburo meets about once a month and the Politburo Standing Committee may meet as frequently as once a week.

By way of comparison, the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) met much more frequently than its post-Mao Chinese Communist Party (CCP) counterpart. This greater frequency reflected the fact that the CPSU Politburo had no formal standing committee like the CCP Politburo's, and the CPSU Politburo itself appears to have constituted the core decision-making body in Soviet politics and foreign policy. In the Brezhnev era, the CPSU Politburo normally met weekly, usually on Thursdays, for three- to six-hour sessions. According to the stenographic report of the 1976 25th CPSU Congress, the Soviet Politburo had met a total of 215 times since the 1971 24th CPSU Congress—or on average 43 times a year.⁵ This frequency and routine were sustained in the post-Brezhnev era. In December 1982, as an early indicator of the reformist inclinations of the regime of General Secretary Yuri Andropov, *Pravda* began carrying brief reports almost weekly—usually on Fridays or Saturdays—on meetings of the CPSU Politburo. Like the Xinhua accounts of CCP Politburo meetings in the 1987–88 and post-16th Party Congress periods, the *Pravda* reports detailed some of the business discussed and some of the decisions made at the meetings. The weekly pace of CPSU Politburo meetings continued until July 1990, when the 28th CPSU Congress mandated that the Politburo meet only monthly and that a revitalized CPSU Secretariat assume responsibility for day-to-day decision making.

Politburo Decision Making

The Xinhua reports on Politburo meetings since the 16th Party Congress offer no details on Politburo procedures or the Politburo's decision-making process. Many Western observers and the Hong Kong China-watching press have long presumed that members of the CCP Politburo vote in deciding the issues before them. In fact, however, the few glimpses of Politburo decision-making procedures either offered by Chinese leaders to foreigners or available in PRC media insist that the Politburo in the past, at least, did not decide issues by voting but rather by consensus.

A rare account of the leadership decision-making process in the Politburo and Secretariat was given by Wang Renzhong, a Deng Xiaoping crony and a member of the party Secretariat from 1980 to 1982, in a speech carried in the party's main journal *Red Flag* (*Hongqi*) in 1981:

Meetings of the Central Committee Secretariat are usually presided over by comrade Hu Yaobang [then the party general secretary]. Comrade Zhao Ziyang [then PRC premier] also takes part in the discussion of important questions concerning government and economic work. Of course, we all respect the opinions of both comrades Yaobang and Ziyang, but decisions are never made by any single individual. Decisions may be made only after going through collective discussion. In the discussions, each comrade may express his different opinion, including those who attend meetings as observers. If there are different opinions, then the Secretariat adopts a cautious attitude and postpones making a decision. Both during the meeting and in discussions among individuals, all comrades in the Secretariat, including our general secretary, earnestly advance criticism and self-criticism. The Central Committee Politburo also works this way.

In 1989, retired Politburo member Hu Qiaomu described similar procedures in the operations of the Politburo after the 13th Party Congress. According to Hu:

- The Politburo is not a “voting machine” that uses voting to establish a majority among its members in order to decide issues. Instead, it makes decisions by consensus through collective discussion, using straw votes only to illuminate the range of support or dissent among the membership on the issue to be decided.
- The general secretary presides over Politburo meetings and sets the agenda. The agenda for each meeting is circulated beforehand, together with all documentary materials related to the items on the agenda so that members will be prepared to discuss them.
- At the meeting, the Politburo works through the items on the agenda. The first speakers on a given item on the agenda are always those who proposed it. What they say is what everyone else already knows from reading the circulated documentary materials.
- Then, those who are familiar with the issue and who have experience or preside over work relevant to it give their views, because they are likely to have well-founded opinions.
- Next, those who have doubts about the proposal or are opposed outright give their views.
- Then, the proponents of the proposal give further explanations, seeking to persuade those who are opposed or have doubts.
- The general secretary then speaks to the issue. Normally, he will speak in favor of the proposal, because he agreed to put it on the agenda in the first place. The opinion of the general secretary is very important, more so than the opinions of the other participants in the discussion.
- Finally, the general secretary calls for a vote. First, those in favor raise their hands; then, those opposed raise theirs. If the vote shows unanimous support or nearly so (only two or three opposed), the proposal is adopted. After the meeting, those who voted in favor continue individually to try to dispel the doubts of those still opposed.
- If the vote is not unanimous or nearly so, the issue is postponed. How close a vote must be in order to be postponed is “not simply arithmetic.” It depends on how strong the

minority's opposition is and on what the responsibilities of those opposed are. That is, if they are in charge of work directly related to the issue, their opposition is more significant. The Politburo, Hu stated, is a "political bureau, not simply a voting machine."⁶

This process of decision making by consensus-building rather than outright voting appears similar to that employed in the Soviet Politburo in the post-Khrushchev era.⁷ A cursory examination of the minutes of CCP Politburo meetings bears this out.

The process of decision making described by Wang Renzhong and Hu Qiaomu in the 1980s has likely continued through the 1990s and into the present under Hu Jintao. "Collective leadership" has been repeatedly emphasized since Deng Xiaoping emphasized it in his August 1980 speech "On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership," the oft-cited locus classicus that has justified political reform ever since. Arguing implicitly against the kind of dictatorial domination over the rest of the top leadership exercised by Mao Zedong, Deng stressed equality among leaders involved in decision making. "Major issues must certainly be discussed and decided upon by the collective," Deng stated. "In the process of taking decisions, it is essential to observe strictly the principle of majority rule and the principle of one-man-one-vote, a party secretary being entitled only to his single vote," he continued, adding that "the first secretary must not take decisions by himself."⁸

In discussing reform of the operation of party committees at all levels—presumably including the Politburo itself—Jiang Zemin's Central Committee report to the 16th Party Congress emphasized the principles of collective decision making even more strongly than did his report to the 1997 15th Party Congress. "In accordance with the principles of collective leadership, democratic centralism, individual consultations, and decisions by meetings, we should improve the mechanisms of debate and decision making within party committees so as to give fuller play to the role of full sessions of the party committees," Jiang's report stated. In endorsing the report, the 16th Party Congress mandated a consensus-building approach and authorized enhancing the supervisory role of full party committees over their smaller standing committees.

The new transparency and image of accountability with respect to the Politburo under Hu's leadership are meant to stimulate comparable reforms in the operation of the party at lower levels and in government institutions. According to a report in the PRC-owned Hong Kong newspaper *Ta kung pao* on October 11, 2003—the day the plenum opened—Hu's report on the work of the Politburo to the Third Plenum is "not simply a change in procedure for procedure's sake" but "an important element in a series of system-building measures" that will enhance "democracy" throughout the party and have "favorable, consequential effects" in state institutions as well.

Several reforms have already been publicized in PRC media:

- For the sake of enhancing party committees' accountability to the bodies that appointed them, party congresses at provincial and lower levels will begin holding sessions that will hear reports from party committees on their work on an annual basis, rather than once every five years. According to Li Zhongjie, now deputy director of the Party History Research Center, trial runs of such sessions have been conducted in 11 counties since the late 1980s and will now be expanded.⁹
- Several institutions have begun training spokespersons for regular press briefings on their operations and taking other steps to enhance transparency. In September, the State Council Information Office began five-day training classes for 100 spokespersons from 66 central party and government organs. In November, it held comparable training classes for 77 spokespersons from China's provinces. On September 6, Xinhua reported that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was beginning to welcome public visitors as an expression of openness. On September 24, Xinhua reported that the Henan Provincial People's Congress Standing Committee had opened its sessions to foreign observers, becoming the first province to do so.¹⁰
- On October 7, Xinhua reported that Hubei and Sichuan had moved to curb the powers of leaders' personal staffs. Hubei, in particular, under the initiative of Hubei party chief and Politburo member Yu Zhengsheng, had adopted regulations to curb abuses of power by the personal secretaries of provincial leaders. "Among the working personnel around some leaders at middle and basic levels," Xinhua observed, "there are plenty of persons who are arrogant and domineering, behave odiously, are extremely selfish, and are morally degenerate."

Implications

The publicity given to meetings of the Politburo since the 16th Party Congress and the effort to underscore the Politburo's accountability to the Central Committee, embodied in Hu's report to the Third Plenum, underscore that the Politburo Standing Committee remains the key decision-making core group among the top leadership and that the larger Politburo and its consensus-building procedures essentially ratify initiatives that the Standing Committee generates. The continuing secrecy about the Standing Committee's activities—despite the still only occasional Xinhua reporting on its meetings—bears out the sensitivity of this body's role. In that respect, the new media attention to the activities of the full Politburo enhances the image of party transparency and accountability without having much impact on the top leadership's machinations in the Politburo Standing Committee.

At the same time, however, the routine publicity given to meetings of the full Politburo and the precedent of regular reports on its work given by the presiding general secretary to the Central Committee institutionalize a process that may serve Hu Jintao's interests in consolidating his personal power. As general secretary, Hu is both the gatekeeper of the agenda of the full Politburo and the Politburo's spokesman to the Central Committee. In emphasizing the accountability of decision-making bodies to the larger bodies to which they report, Hu may seek

to shift the dynamics of decision making and power in the Standing Committee, where his power is limited by the membership of several men who owe him no particular loyalty, by appealing to the larger Politburo and, beyond that, to the Central Committee itself. In that respect, Hu's vigorous promotion since becoming general secretary of the principles of collective leadership serves not only to further party reform, as authorized by the 16th Party Congress, but also to enhance his personal power.

Notes

¹ Ye Duchu, "On the First Agenda Topic of the Third Plenary Session of the 16th CCP Central Committee," *Liaowang* (Outlook), 2003, no. 37 (September 15), FBIS CPP-2003-0923-000046; Hu Kui, "Politburo Reporting on Its Work Signals the Beginning of Inner-Party Democracy," *Zhongguo xinwen zhouban* (China News Weekly), September 29, 2003; Kung Shang-yin, "New Relationships in Party and Government—Being Accountable to Those Who Confer Power," *Ta kung pao*, October 11, 2003, FBIS CPP-2003-1011-000032; and Chung Hsueh-ping, "Third Plenum Marks Beginning of New Stage of Reform," *Wen wei po*, October 15, 2003, FBIS CPP-2003-1015-000090.

² A. Doak Barnett, *The Making of Foreign Policy in China: Structure and Process* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), 9–11.

³ Personal notes of the author, April 20, 1989.

⁴ *Yomiuri shimbun*, February 17, 2001.

⁵ Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union Is Governed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 471, and Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Politics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 137.

⁶ Personal notes of the author, April 20, 1989.

⁷ Hough and Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union Is Governed*, 472, and Sakwa, *Soviet Politics*, 137.

⁸ *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975–1982* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 323.

⁹ *Wen wei po*, August 27, 2003, FBIS CPP-2003-0827-000091.

¹⁰ Xinhua News Agency, September 22 and November 3, 2003, FBIS CPP-2003-0922-000061 and CPP-2003-1103-000119, respectively.

Table 1: Publicized Meetings of the 16th Party Politburo

| <u>Date</u> | <u>Business</u> |
|---------------------------------|---|
| November 16, 2002 (Saturday) | Launched campaign to study Jiang Zemin's Central Committee work report to 16th Party Congress; deliberated division of Politburo labor. |
| December 2, 2002 (Monday) | Discussed economic situation in preparation for annual national conference on 2003 economic work; adopted work rules for 16th Politburo. |
| December 26, 2002 (Thursday) | Discussed agricultural and rural issues in preparation for annual national conference on 2003 rural work. |
| January 28, 2003 (Tuesday) | Discussed Central Discipline Inspection Commission report on 2003 work in combating corruption. |
| February 21, 2003 (Friday) | Set date for 16th Central Committee's Second Plenum; discussed "Opinion on Deepening Administrative and Institutional Reform"; discussed slate of state leaders to be adopted and State Council work report to be approved at Second Plenum and presented to 10th National People's Congress. |
| March 28, 2003 (Friday) | Discussed and approved for implementation a document on news reporting on leadership meetings and activities and regulations on foreign travel by Politburo members. |
| April 28, 2003 (Monday) | Launched new campaign to study "three represents"; discussed balancing priority of economic work and defeating SARS. |

- May 23, 2003
(Friday) Discussed arrangements for improving personnel work and employing people of talent; approved compilation of program for studying “three represents”; discussed “other matters.”
- July 21, 2003
(Monday) Summed up progress and stressed continuing priority and tasks in economic work and suppressing SARS; discussed “other matters.”
- August 11, 2003
(Monday) Scheduled Central Committee’s Third Plenum for October; set plenum agenda of hearing Politburo work report, presenting decision on economic reform, and proposing revisions of PRC constitution; “looked into other matters.”
- September 29, 2003
(Monday) Scheduled Central Committee’s Third Plenum for October 11–14; discussed Politburo’s work since 16th Party Congress in preparation for report to plenum; discussed draft decision on economic reform and draft proposal on PRC constitutional revision; “studied other issues.”
- November 24, 2003
(Monday) Assessed economic situation and 2003 economic work; discussed cultivating talent; set annual national conference on 2003 economic work and national conference on cultivating talent; discussed “other topics.”

Table 2: Publicized Study Sessions of the 16th Party Politburo

| <u>Date</u> | <u>Topic</u> | <u>Briefing experts</u> |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| December 26, 2002 (Thursday) | Studied PRC constitution; heard Hu Jintao speech on authority of constitution and running country according to law. | People's University Professor Xu Chongde, Wuhan University Professor Zhou Yezhong |
| January 28, 2003 (Tuesday) | Studied trends in world economy; heard Hu Jintao speech on importance of topic for China's economy. | Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Institute of World Economy and Politics Director Yu Yongding, CASS research fellow Jaing Xiaojuan |
| March 29, 2003 (Saturday) | Studied promoting employment; heard Hu Jintao speech on importance for social stability. | People's University Professor Zeng Xiangquan, CASS Institute of Population and Labor Economics Director Cai Fang |
| April 28, 2003 (Monday) | Studied trends in contemporary science and technology in world and China; heard Hu Jintao speech on defeating SARS through science and technology and by mobilizing country. | Chinese Academy of Sciences Institute of Physics Director Wang Enge, Qinghua University Professor Xue Lan, Center for Disease Prevention and Control researcher Zeng Guang |
| May 23, 2003 (Friday) | Studied trends in military development in major countries; heard Hu Jintao speech on China's military modernization priorities. | China Institute of Military Science researchers Qian Haihao and Fu Liquan |
| July 21, 2003 (Monday) | Studied development of party ideology; heard Hu Jintao speech on importance of current study of "three represents." | Central Committee's Party History Research Center researchers Zhang Qihua and Zhang Shujun |

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|--------------------------------|--|---|
| August 12, 2003 (Tuesday) | Studied trends in world culture and in China; heard Hu Jintao speech on building “socialist culture with Chinese characteristics.” | CASS Institute of Journalism researcher Zhang Ximing, Qinghua University School of Media and Broadcasting Professor Xiong Chengyu |
| September 29, 2003 (Monday) | Studied building socialist political civilization and governing according to law; heard Hu Jintao speech on political reform. | Fudan University International Relations Professor Lin Shangli, CASS Institute of Law researcher Li Lin |
| November 24, 2003 (Monday) | Studied history of development in major countries since 15th century; heard Hu Jintao speech on importance of historical knowledge in guiding China’s current development. | Beijing Normal University Professor Qi Shirong, Nanjing University Professor Qin Chengdan |