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New Challenges in Predicting China's Upcoming Political Succession

Though it is difficult to predict PRC leadership changes, accurate assessments are necessary to create effective US policies toward China.

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China is set to undergo a major turnover in leadership at the 18th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) National Congress in fall 2012. The country's three most important leadership bodies—the Politburo Standing Committee, State Council, and Central Military Commission—will replace about two-thirds of their members because of age or other factors. The principal figures responsible for the country's political and ideological affairs, economic and financial administration, foreign policy, and military operations will consist largely of newcomers after 2012.

For the next two years, the leadership transition will be the main focus of power contenders in China. The China-watching community will also pay more attention to the next generation of rising stars, especially the successors to PRC President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao.

For US government leaders and business executives, accurate assessments of China's upcoming political succession are essential to creating effective policies toward China. Though access to information about China's

leaders has never been better, Western analysts often miss the mark when they make predictions about politics and policy in China.

Better access, improved analysis?

For the first few decades of the People's Republic of China, Western China watchers had minimal access to information and sources. Chinese military affairs scholar Ellis Joffe once jokingly referred to his research on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as an exercise in "seeking truth from unavailable facts." Today, many sources of information are available online, even for the relatively sensitive subject of Chinese military affairs. Several dozen unofficial Chinese websites focus on military affairs and provide extensive information about PLA officers' backgrounds, PRC military strategies, China's naval development objectives, and China's newly obtained weapons.

The availability of new open sources of information and unprecedentedly dynamic US-China scholarly exchanges have altered the way Americans perceive political and economic developments in China. In particular, the sudden arrival and meteoric growth of the Internet has allowed the public to quickly and conveniently access more comprehensive official and unofficial Chinese sources. In some ways, the rapid growth of Internet sources has created an "oversupply" of information—a new challenge for those who study China. As John Naisbitt, author of the *Megatrends* series has noted in a general context, Western researchers of Chinese politics often find themselves "drowning in information but starved for knowledge."

In trying to understand Chinese politics, many foreign analysts tend to hold one of two extreme views. Some analysts hold stale perceptions, are vulnerable to rumors, and overly focus on investigating information obtained from unverified "secret documents" in China. Other analysts have become so impressed by the achievements of the PRC leadership that they have lost their critical lens and sometimes overlook the fundamental deficiencies and flaws of the present-day Chinese political system.

False predictions and wrong lessons

Even with more information available each day, China watchers' predictions about PRC elite politics still often overlook some important trends. As the new century began, for example, many China analysts and experts expected major events—China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the leadership succession in the 16th CCP National Congress in 2002, and the severe acute

respiratory syndrome epidemic in 2003—to trigger the decline of the CCP leadership or even the collapse of the regime. Gordon Chang's 2001 book, *The Coming Collapse of China*, was one of the most frequently cited monographs on China in the first half of the decade.

But toward the end of the decade, many analysts began to perceive the Chinese political system as "resilient." According to this view, CCP leaders have found a sustainable way to maintain their authoritarian rule over this emerging economic powerhouse. A large number of these China watchers focus on the PRC government's growing "confidence" and overlook the vulnerability of the communist one-party system, the serious difficulties it faces, and the possibility of a failure to broker deals between competing factions in the next leadership transition. (The two most powerful factions—the leaders who come from high-ranking official families, known as "princelings," and the officials who advanced their careers through the Chinese Communist Youth League, known as "*tuanpai*"—are vigorously competing against each other for power, influence, and the policy agenda. The two leading power contenders in the fifth generation, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, each represent one of these two factions [see the *CBR*, March-April 2008, p.20].)

One of the central arguments of the "authoritarian resilience" thesis is that the CCP has relied on economic development and material incentives for the Chinese people to prevent sociopolitical challenges. New socioeconomic forces, especially entrepreneurs and the emerging middle class, are seen as political allies of the CCP regime. But this perception should be subject to greater debate. Just as yesterday's political target could become today's political ally, today's political ally could become tomorrow's political rabble-rouser. For example, recent studies cited in *Chinese Social Sciences* have found that the Chinese middle class tends to be more cynical about policy promises, more demanding about policy implementation, and more sensitive to corruption among officials than other social groups. If middle-class Chinese begin to think that their voices are being suppressed, that their access to information is being unjustly blocked, or that their space for social action is unduly confined, a political unrest of sorts may take place.

The grievances of China's middle class over government policy have become more evident in recent years. The rising unemployment rate among recent college graduates (who usually come from middle-class families and are presumed to be members of China's future middle class) should send an alarming signal to the PRC government, as well as those who

Quick Glance

■ Though difficult to make, accurate assessments of China's upcoming political succession are necessary to create effective policies toward China.

■ China watchers should look beyond overly positive or negative assessments of the PRC leadership transition and the country's political trajectory.

■ Uncertainty surrounding the upcoming leadership turnover and its potential impact on the Chinese Communist Party's factional dynamics may make 2012 an especially interesting year in Chinese elite politics.

analyze Chinese elite politics. In a recent forum on China's response to the global financial crisis held by the Academy of Chinese Reform and Development in Beijing, Chinese scholars argued that the government should pay much greater attention to the needs and concerns of the middle class—otherwise the “sensitive” Chinese middle class will become the “angry” middle class.

Upcoming PRC leadership turnover

In fall 2012, the 18th CCP National Congress will appoint new leaders to replace President Hu, Premier Wen, and other senior leaders. Some prominent Western China watchers may be overly optimistic about the likelihood of a peaceful, orderly, and institutionalized transition. For example, in his new book, *How China's Leaders Think*, Robert Lawrence Kuhn, a businessman-turned-biographer of PRC senior leaders, praises the rising stars of the fifth-generation leadership for their talents, wisdom, and vision. The book presents Xi Jinping's and Li Keqiang's succession to the positions currently held by Hu and Wen as certain and predicts that, as a team, the fifth generation of leaders will take over power smoothly from the fourth generation in 2012.

But this upcoming succession may not be as smooth as the last power transition in 2002. It has been widely perceived in China that Xi and Li are weaker and less impressive than Hu and Wen. Several factors make these two potential successors even more vulnerable. For example, a few other fifth-generation leaders are notoriously ambitious and probably more capable than Xi and Li. Also, Hu Jintao is not the only soon-to-be retired top leader who would like to run the country from behind the scenes—Hu's predecessor Jiang Zemin also wants a say. Meanwhile, several of the regime's military leaders have become increasingly out of party and civilian control.

Though the fifth-generation leaders boast remarkable life experiences, the top contenders for succession must overcome many daunting obstacles to consolidate their power in the years ahead. Xi and Li's formative experiences during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) as sent-down youth working at rural farms (along with many of their fifth-generation peers) led these future leaders to develop valuable traits such as endurance, adaptability, and humility. Exposure to Western ideas and values in their college years in the late 1970s and early 1980s, one of the most liberal periods of university education in contemporary China, helped them form worldviews that diverge from previous generations of PRC leaders. In addition, their shared leadership experiences in running provinces and cities in the course of the country's rapid economic development in the 1990s appears to have prepared them well, as they are now reaching the pinnacle of power. But Xi and Li are less experienced in a variety of ways than Hu and Wen were when they were in line to succeed former PRC President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji in 2002.

A look at Xi Jinping

When Hu was being considered for China's top leadership post, he was the only contender in his generation who had served as a provincial party secretary in two provinces. He had also been on the Politburo Standing Committee for 10 years. Hu was well known for his political savvy, strong network within the Chinese Communist Youth League, and uncontroversial rhetorical ability.

Xi does not stand out in the same way among his competitors. Among the 344 full and alternate members of the 15th Central Committee in 1997, Xi received the fewest votes from the more than 2,000 delegates of the Party Congress. The fact that he served only eight months as CCP Secretary of Shanghai before being promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee made his rise unusual in terms of the new norms in elite promotion. Until now, Xi has failed to form his own political network of peers and members of lower echelons of the PRC leadership. Most important, as with other prominent figures in the fifth generation, Xi's capacity and leadership skills have yet to be tested.

Some of Xi's public remarks have been highly controversial. During his visit to Mexico in 2009, Xi accused American politicians of “interfering in China's domestic affairs,” saying: “It seems there are some foreigners who've stuffed their bellies and don't have anything else to do but point fingers. First, China does not export revolution. Second, we're not exporting hunger or poverty. And third, we aren't making trouble for you. What else is there to say?” These remarks were characterized even by many Chinese bloggers as “undiplomatic” and “non-statesmanlike.”

Xi, of course, has his advantages. He is well positioned as the frontrunner in the fifth-generation leadership. His recent appointment as vice chair of the powerful Central Military Commission was another major step on the path to becoming Hu's successor, and the PRC political establishment will likely soon launch a public campaign to praise his credentials. Xi has long been known for his market-friendly approach to economic development, and business communities—both state-owned and private firms—may support Xi despite his lack of a solid political power base. Xi's experience in the military—serving as a personal assistant to the minister of Defense early in his career—also makes him stand out among his peers.

Eye on Li Keqiang

Many observers think that Li Keqiang, who is expected to succeed Wen Jiabao as premier, lacks Zhu Rongji's political courage and Wen's charisma. Zhu and Wen were already known for their leadership talents and administrative achievements by the time they were vice premiers and even earlier in their careers. Wen worked as a chief of staff for three CCP secretary generals, two of whom were purged, and yet he managed not only to survive, but to

rise rapidly. In addition, Wen had gained broad administrative experience before becoming premier—coordinating power transitions, commanding the anti-flood campaign in 1998, supervising the country's agricultural affairs, and overseeing financial and banking reform. Wen's talent as an administrator and his role as a coalition-builder explain his legendary survival and success. In particular, Wen has

ity in the country. Their unconventional and bold efforts to tap public opinion for political advancement may change the dynamic in which future leaders jockey for power. Vice Premier Wang Qishan and CCP Organization Department Director Li Yuanchao, also a princeling and a *tuanpai* leader respectively, have developed their own hot-button issues. Wang has consolidated his reputation as

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been known, both at home and abroad, for his remarkably quick response during natural disasters and other crises.

In contrast to Wen, Li has not reacted as quickly to national emergencies, including the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 and the Yushu earthquake early this year. During Li's tenure as Henan's governor and party secretary, the province was notorious for its "AIDS villages," coal mine explosions, and widespread counterfeiting of goods. Only after then-Vice Premier Wu Yi visited some of the AIDS villages in Henan did Li acknowledge the problem. Some AIDS activists and nongovernmental organizations have criticized Li's lack of action as a provincial chief.

Li also has his advantages. His humble family background, low-profile personality, legal education, reputation for loyalty, strong political network, and provincial leadership experience may prepare him well for the role as a top national leader, but it will be difficult for him to claim any major achievements as a provincial chief or vice premier. In sharp contrast with Zhu's restructuring of the Chinese bureaucracy, which resulted in substantial personnel changes and increased the efficiency of the central government, many observers believe that Li's reform of major ministries and commissions has been largely ineffective.

Further hampering his chances, the Chinese public may view Li as too "soft," even compared to Wen. Analysts in China and abroad believe that the State Council's economic policies have become less effective in controlling China's provinces, major cities, and key state-owned enterprises. Having a premier with such a soft image may not fit well with the need for a more efficient and effective central government to coordinate its various policy initiatives.

Other rising stars

A factor that makes the upcoming PRC leadership succession more uncertain is that other rising stars in the fifth generation, most noticeably Chongqing CCP Secretary Bo Xilai (a princeling) and Guangdong CCP Secretary Wang Yang (a *tuanpai* leader), have launched self-promotion campaigns that have garnered great public-

one of the few Chinese leaders who understands the global financial system, while Li has recently initiated an ambitious national plan to cultivate and recruit global talent. The daunting socioeconomic and political challenges that face the fifth-generation leaders will likely spur other leaders to reach out to the public for support. The country may soon witness a more dynamic and perhaps even more factionalized phase in its potentially difficult—but still hopefully peaceful—political transformation.

Imperative for a well-grounded analysis

The general sense of uncertainty surrounding the upcoming leadership turnover and the profound effect it might have on the CCP's factional dynamics will likely make 2012 an especially interesting year in Chinese elite politics. China watchers should be aware of many possible policy deadlocks within the Chinese collective leadership. At the same time, observers may also feel a sense of urgency on the part of the Chinese political elites to search for new sources of legitimacy.

Foreign observers who study Chinese politics should look beyond overly positive or negative assessments of the PRC leadership transition and the country's political trajectory. Rather, China watchers should be aware of inter-party factional dynamics, new institutional norms, and rapidly changing rules of elite politics in China. Analysts should not be led astray by superficial phenomena or official propaganda. A careful, balanced, and non-ideological analysis of the upcoming leadership transition is essential for Washington to implement effective China policies, especially when China has more influence on the world economy and regional security than perhaps ever before. 完

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