



The 17th CCP Congress: The Issue of Succession

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress, regularly held once every five years since the early 1980s, usually has three tasks: making whole or partial leadership transitions at the highest level, highlighting a particular set of ideological/theoretical concepts, and in many cases, stipulating the guidelines of major domestic/foreign policies. Leadership transition is definitely the most significant part of the congress since it bears a direct and personal imprint on the other two tasks.

Although the 17th CCP Congress to be convened in the coming fall will not herald wholesale leadership transition, the congress is still likely to have significant implications for the future political development of China.

With the current Hu Jintao leadership likely to remain in power for the next five years, the issue under spotlight now is to what extent the incumbent leadership needs to lay the groundwork to pave the way for leadership change at the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Moreover, a related and perhaps even more important question is how the process should be conducted.

Leadership Succession: A Game of Insufficient Rules

Despite some minor progress in formal and informal regulations, the handover of national political power still remains one of the most under-institutionalized sectors in CCP political life. In CCP history, the practice of single-handedly picking successors by supreme leaders has had more failures than successes. Mao failed three times in personally appointing his successors and Deng Xiaoping, together with other party elders of his era, failed twice.

Prescient of the intricate complications and potential disastrous consequences of any leadership transition fallout, Deng Xiaoping not only designated and offered a strong helping hand to his immediate successor Jiang Zemin, but also unequivocally decided on Jiang's successor Hu Jintao. Owing to Deng's authority as well as Hu's extreme personal circumspection, the last power transition has been unprecedentedly smooth and apparently well-organized.

Selection of Successor on the Agenda Now?

The current succession issue revolves around finding a suitable candidate to take over Hu's key position as the unifying core of the next cohort of leaders. Even though the final outcome will only be known in five years, as most of the incumbent leaders are widely expected to stay at the helm until the 18th Congress, there is some urgency for Hu to prepare for such transition now rather than later.

The urgency of the issue has to do with four major factors. First, if the informal rule of

retirement by the age of 70 is observed, a number of Politburo and its Standing Committee incumbent members are expected to step down this year. As such, these new vacancies have to be filled and the people who fill these positions will surely have a head start over other potential competitors in the next five years.

Second, there is no political strongman in China who can overwhelm dissenting views to single-handedly make the decision on succession at the last minute. For the sake of long-term political stability, it is necessary to start the process early on. Moreover, it is also imperative for the potential candidate to have some sort of political platform to develop both the necessary ideological tenets intelligible to the public and also able to build some sort of national and international profile before assuming the top position.

Third, there is still the need for a political helmsman to maintain political stability. To attain this political gravitas requires time and is likely to be an even more challenging mission in the future as potential contenders have roughly similar qualifications, experience, and abilities.

Fourth, as China enters an era of mounting domestic problems and a delicate international environment, the potential successor needs to be involved in the decision-making process on core issues to learn the ropes. A five-year grooming period is only half the length of what Hu himself experienced.

Business as Usual or Opportunity for Intra-Party Democracy

What then are the major options for selecting a candidate? If the traditional business-as-usual approach is adopted, a top-down nomination and designation of one obvious candidate would take place on the basis of mutual compromise among some of the key incumbent leaders. This option, if well-managed, may forestall internecine conflicts among contenders. The drawback to this approach, if things go awry, is that it may sow the seeds of future discontent and defiance.

A widely speculated second option is to promote a batch of candidates to the Politburo or even the Standing Committee of the Politburo for a period of incubation and competition. A final decision can then be made by collective deliberation among the Party elders in a plenary session before or at the 18th Congress.

A third option is to practice intra-party democracy – as Vice President Zeng Qinghong, Deputy President of the Central Party School Li Junru, and many others have recently vaguely advocated. If this approach is adopted, the choice of a tentative successor can be arrived at in vastly different ways. For instance, some sort of more competitive election could be allowed either by the Congress or the new Central Committee to select members of the Politburo and its Standing Committee. The batch of new and younger leaders could be the pool of candidates for the top position at the 18th Congress.

However, such bold moves of intra-party democracy are unlikely to take place at the moment. Practicing it now may endanger the chances of some incumbent leaders. When it comes to intra-party democracy, caution is still the norm of the day. It is still unclear among advocates of this approach to what extent and at what level should intra-party democracy be carried out. There is the fear among the elite of having things get out of control leading to a destabilization of the whole political system. There may be the risk that once the threshold of democracy within the party is crossed, a spill-over effect will be felt not only within the party but also within society at large. Such a spill-over runs the risk of triggering a new round of political activism akin to that of the late 1980s.

Conclusion:

Recently, discussions about political reforms and intra-party democracy in China among elite and intellectuals have seen an increased intensity. In addition, there are also signs of the incumbent leadership making preparations to select and groom successors. Will the two trends converge at the 17th Congress? Perhaps not in very significant ways. However, minor moves toward intra-party liberalism are possible. Given the changed context of Chinese elite politics, even minor moves would have profound significance for China's political development in the long run. The 17th Party Congress will certainly be an important moment of political experiment and test.

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