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Beijing's Leadership Transition: Testing Times for China

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Synopsis

The political scandal over the Bo Xilai affair has led to concerns over China's internal stability. Over the past two decades, the centrality of the Party's dominance has been maintained by the Chinese Communist Party's skilful maneuvering around disturbing domestic issues and careful projection of an image of stability abroad. The attitude of the People's Liberation Army would be crucial.

Commentary

When Chongqing's former police chief Wang Lijun sneaked into the American consulate in Chengdu on 6 February this year, few could have predicted the series of events that would soon follow. A month on, the commencement of the National People's Congress "Two Sessions" was overshadowed by the absence of Bo Xilai, the Party Chief of Chongqing, from the event. Shortly after, Bo was suspended from his positions in the CCP and his wife Gu Kailai was placed under investigation for homicide in connection with the death of British businessman Neil Haywood.

Centrality of Party Dominance

Although there have been no further upheavals, the incident has cast the spotlight on Beijing's internal stability and whether the CCP – which is in the midst of its once-in-a-decade leadership transition – remains on top of its domestic affairs. Analysts have argued that the main responsibility of the leadership – post-Deng Xiaoping – has changed from the establishment and preservation of the politico-economic system to the development and management of the increasingly successful and complex society and economy that China has become. To accomplish this goal would require a more nuanced and methodical leadership style.

One thing is certain: the CCP will not tolerate any challenge to its rule. The Party's taboos and sensitivities extend to even advocating of socio-economic appeals by ordinary folks, such as the blind lawyer Chen Guangcheng. As any political reforms can only come from within the Party, through improving 'intra-party democracy', the CCP hopes to produce a system that is self-organising and self-cleansing. This is not going to be easy, as Party leaders with vested interests are bound to limit the extent to which an orderly Party organisation can be attained, much less a thorough cleansing.

Furthermore, corruption continues to remain the biggest obstacle to Beijing's reform plans. To address this would require substantial changes to the current politico-economic system, one that is, ironically, both China's

biggest bane and boon. While the system undoubtedly has - for the past two decades – contributed to Beijing’s burgeoning economic growth, it has also led to corruption at various levels of the CCP and beyond, as highly publicised cases over the last few years have demonstrated.

Power struggles will continue to be a mainstay of the CCP’s organisational ethos. While top national decisions are purportedly deliberated and arrived at collectively by the nine Standing Committee members of the CCP Politburo, individual members remain essentially in charge of particular broad portfolios. Over the years, these have developed more or less into mutually exclusive “fiefdoms”, with little or no centralized control. However, as Bo’s case demonstrated, the CCP would not allow its power base and support to be overly aligned with any one individual leader, but to be collectively appropriated.

The need to achieve a fine balance between greater institutionalisation of party norms and expectations and the preservation of individual leaders’ freedom of decision-making can also exacerbate tensions among party leaders, not least between the national and local leaderships. Indeed, Bo’s unceremonious removal is due not so much to ideological differences as Bo having committed perhaps the cardinal sin of outshining the existing top leadership.

PLA’s Support for the Party

The social protests that took place in the Middle East last year have raised expectations among Chinese social reformers of the possibility of change. Yet at present this is merely political conjecture at best. Among the general population, there seems to be a tacit acceptance of a relatively authoritarian style of governance as long as the country remains capable of delivering material progress. But as the global economic situation gets more challenging for Beijing to deliver on its promises one would not be surprised if dissidents start to pile on the pressure.

This is where the role of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) becomes critical in ensuring that the authority of the party is not undercut. Earlier last month (15 May), a commentary in China’s top military newspaper *Liberation Army Daily* urged its officers to remain the Communist Party’s “most loyal” defenders in the face of “Western plotting” and cited recent cases of ill-discipline and corruption as a “profound warning”.

While it has been observed that the CCP Central Military Commission over the past 20 years has been headed by civilians with little or no military experience, the fact that both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao derived their legitimacy from the much revered Deng Xiaoping afforded the CCP’s civilian leadership with considerable goodwill from the military. Whether the expected new batch of leaders, are able to command the same level of respect and obedience from the PLA will be crucial in determining the success of civil-military relations.

Nevertheless, with China’s last major military engagement (against Vietnam) having occurred more than thirty years ago, few among China’s current crop of top military leaders saw actual action in their erstwhile peacetime career, and are likely to be more technocratic in their outlook and attitude. Conversely, the current and future batches of China’s top civilian leaders, though untested militarily, did suffer hardship in their younger days during the heydays of the Cultural Revolution. They are thus no strangers to the type of highly disciplined lifestyle characteristic of the military. As such, it is too early to speculate that the military top brass and their future civilian bosses will not get along.

These are testing times for China, and Beijing’s responses to issues and incidents over the next few months will be closely watched by the world. One should not bet against China’s ability to overcome these challenges. The peaceful leadership transition of the world’s second largest economy is in everybody’s best interest.

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