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China's New Leadership: How Reformist Will It Be?

By Liu Liu and Benjamin Ho

Synopsis

The CCP's leadership transition raises more questions about the direction of the new generation of party leaders. Led by Xi Jinping, the new leadership would have much to do to live up to expectations of political and social reform.

Commentary

THE HANDOVER of China's leadership to President-in-waiting Xi Jinping has raised the prospects of a more reformist-oriented regime in China. The reforms that are expected to be pursued span the spectrum of China's social life including the political, legal, health and educational fields. They have also raised the possibility that the CCP's policies under President Xi will be more transparent.

Similar expectations had preceded the rise of President Hu Jintao a decade ago. Hopes that he would promote greater democracy and reforms proved overly optimistic. Instead, the Chinese media found itself increasingly muzzled and subjected to greater government regulation and opposition activists were subjected to strict curbs. Will President Xi's leadership in the coming years prove to be different?

What's new

A recent report by Reporters Without Borders highlighted Beijing's harsh treatment of dissent over the past five years and the Chinese government's absolute control over news and information in the country. Over the past few years, social stability – which the CCP prides above everything else – has also been subjected to increasing stress.

Indeed Beijing's massive economic stimulus programme had supported near double-digit growth (an average of 10 per cent per year between 2007-2011), but had also resulted in rising levels of inflation, piled-up debt and social unrest. China was rocked by an estimated 180,000 protests, mass riots and mass incidents—more than four times the tally of a decade earlier. This notwithstanding, the 18th National Party Congress witnessed several features that were substantially different from the past.

Three different features

Firstly, Xi Jinping's speech at the end of the party congress met with wide acclaim both at home and abroad.

Unlike his predecessor's opening address, Xi avoided most of the popular slogans that were often recited in official speeches. No mention was made of Mr Hu or any of his predecessors; instead Xi centred the core of his message around the need for the CCP to fight corruption and promising to continue China's "rejuvenation". Furthermore, terms such as "the people", "the nation", "improving the livelihood of the people" were frequently emphasised.

Xi's speech was also praised by some of China's social media sites for possessing a "human touch". According to Chinese microblogging site Weibo, which did a survey of Chinese online sentiments, Xi's speech received greater support from the online community – many with strong reform voices - compared to the speech made by President Hu 10 years ago.

Secondly, President Hu's decision to give up his position as Chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission, thus ensuring a "clean break" with politics, was unusual in China's modern history. By doing so, President Hu not only gave complete autonomy to the new generation of Chinese leaders to chart their own course, but also avoided criticisms that an "invisible hand" was behind the scenes, as was the case in the previous transition involving former president Jiang Zemin and Hu, which resulted in factional conflicts within the party.

Chinese scholars have noted that the increasing institutionalisation of China's policy-making processes had reduced the need for individuals to wield power in a hierarchical context as was the case in the past. This has raised the possibility that the future of China's policies – both domestic and international – would be increasingly predictable and less subjected to private whims and fancies.

Thirdly, Xi's wife – Peng Liyuan, a celebrated Chinese folk singer – provided added star power, at least in public diplomacy. Foreign media have thus speculated whether Peng would play a low-key role – in accordance with China's tradition – or would be equally prominent, in the mode of White House First Lady Michelle Obama, thus boosting China's international image. Over the past 20 years, Peng's achievements have arguably received greater public recognition than those of Xi; this could usher an era of "creative diplomacy" instead of the usual "chequebook diplomacy" approach that Beijing is often accused of adopting.

Navigating the future on Chinese terms

Top Chinese legislator Wu Bangguo said in a speech in 2009 that the country would never copy the Western political system and that lawmakers should maintain the correct political orientation with the leadership of the CCP as the core. Moving forward, this fundamental feature of a socialist system with Chinese characteristics – as reiterated by both Hu and Xi during the party congress – would continue to be upheld. Thus any changes – or reforms – made by the CCP government would necessarily be on its own terms, and will not be dictated either by external powers or internal pressures.

Indeed, the decision to reduce the number of members in the Politburo Standing Committee from nine to seven has led outsiders to question the reform credentials of the incoming Chinese leadership. Both Guangdong Party Chief Wang Yang and Li Yuanchao, who heads the party organisation machinery, were overlooked in the selection of the standing committee in favour of party elders. Some political observers have suggested that the selection of the current seven was made under the strong influence of Chinese elder statesman Jiang Zemin and will likely change at the next party congress in five years time when Jiang's influence is further weakened.

At present, much of the talk emerging from Chinese circles regarding Beijing's future is mostly political conjecture. It remains to be seen what kind of reforms this new generation of leaders would be able to push through. The next five years would be crucial for President Xi and his administration as they respond to a Chinese population that is increasingly pragmatic and demanding while ensuring that party unity remains intact.

Outside of China, Beijing's relations with Washington, Europe and Southeast Asia will need to be managed properly. Indeed the CCP's ability to withstand the stresses of political change will be a crucial factor in ensuring its longevity and credibility, both in the eyes of its own people and the rest of the world.

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