



China: new political directions under a new leadership?

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A new Chinese leadership is about to take power at the National People's Congress, which begins on 5 March. Xi Jinping will take on the role of President, while Li Keqiang will become Premier. It has been a long-trailed succession, although it was thrown into some doubt in 2012 following the downfall of Bo Xilai, the charismatic party chief of Chongqing Region. But the November 2012 Party Congress, at which Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the Communist Party, confirmed that that initial forecasts were right. Commentators are now focused on whether, and if so, how, Xi and Li will change China's domestic course. Early signals suggest that more effectively combating official corruption and reducing social inequalities will be top priorities. Xi has also suggested that the Party should accept greater public scrutiny and criticism. Nobody expects the new leadership suddenly to embrace Western-style democracy, but some do detect hopeful signs in the spheres of political reform and human rights. Others are more sceptical, pointing to ongoing instances of repression. Overall, efforts to go beyond the 'muddling through' which arguably characterised the decade in power of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao can be expected. But whether these efforts will be part of a coherent and sustained domestic reform programme that can meet China's many contemporary challenges is much more uncertain.

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1 A bumpy succession

In October 2010, the Fifth Plenum of the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party appeared to bring speculation to an end about who would succeed the current Chinese leadership at the forthcoming party congress in autumn 2012, after what is becoming the standard tenure of ten years, by appointing Vice-President Xi Jinping, the Vice-Chair of the Central Military Commission. The person who is appointed to this position is normally expected to become General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of the People's Republic, in this case replacing the incumbent, Hu Jintao. At the same time, all the indications were that Vice-Premier Li Keqiang would duly become Premier, replacing Wen Jiabao. Xi Jinping was widely viewed as a protégé of former President Jiang Zemin, while Li was seen as a representative of Hu Jintao's faction.

The clear impression was given at the time that there would now be an orderly succession of the 'fifth generation' of leaders, confirming an increasingly widespread view that the party elite had at last found a way of sufficiently institutionalising the process so as to safeguard stability. One analyst, William Overholt, [asserted](#) in early 2012:

Beginning in 2003, China shifted from charismatic to institutionalized leadership. Today's leaders are administrators, risk-averse, incremental, pragmatic, unemotional, and colorless.

Perhaps Bo Xilai, at that time the party secretary of Chongqing region and another leading contender for a place on the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Communist Party, had slipped Overholt's mind when he wrote that. The circumstances of Bo's public downfall since the last National People's Congress (NPC) took place in March 2012 have been exhaustively covered in the media and are not discussed here. Bo Xilai's style was highly charismatic and consciously revived elements of Maoist symbolism, building a strong political base for him. The party leadership may have accommodated his maverick approach (despite a degree of unease about it) partly because it was viewed by some within its ranks as an experiment in how far the links between the party and society could be strengthened without fundamentally 'rocking the boat' in the delicate sphere of political reform. Bo Xilai's status as a 'princeling' –the term applied to senior officials whose families have a long history of leadership within the party, giving them a considerable advantage in their rise to power – is likely also to have afforded him some protection.

Bo's catastrophic fall brought the Chongqing experiment to an end. In its wake, Elizabeth Economy argued that the succession process had now been thrown "[into disarray](#)":

[...] these events have unmasked what people in and outside China have long discussed: the truly extraordinary level of corruption that pervades the country's political system and the belief of some Chinese officials that the law does not apply to them.

However, in the end, it seems that any disarray was successfully contained. The Communist Party held its Congress in November 2012 and a new party leadership emerged, with Xi Jinping appointed General Secretary and Chairman of the Central Military Commission and Li Keqiang ranked second on the seven-man (down from nine) Politburo Standing Committee. This paved the way for Xi to become President at the March 2013 NPC and Li to become Premier, as originally expected.

China has not just seen turbulence at the top over the past year or two. There has also been plenty from below as well. For example, in late 2011, the village of Wukan in the southern

Guangdong Province rose up against corrupt local party officials. The response of the party leadership was ultimately pragmatic and the situation was stabilised through the holding of new local elections in March 2012. Some argue that this response was mainly due to the level of international media attention that the revolt received. Hundreds of local protests against officials occur every month, most of them beneath the radars of the international media.

There was increased harassment of human rights activists and other peaceful opponents in the run-up to the 2012 NPC and the Party Congress. Some linked this to the party's nervousness about the succession process. One notable incident featured the blind human rights lawyer Chen Guangcheng, who fled house arrest to the US Consulate in Chengdu in early May 2012 and was eventually allowed to leave for the US to study. Chinese assent to his departure represented another relatively pragmatic response to a situation that could have done serious damage to China-US relations, but harassment of his extended family continued after Chen's departure. Meanwhile, Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo is into the fourth year of an eleven year prison sentence for 'subversion'. There was also a wave of [self-immolations](#) in Tibet. There continued to be criticism of the value and effectiveness of both the UK and [EU](#) Human Rights Dialogues with China.

2 Future prospects

Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang will formally take charge at the NPC, which starts on 5 March. But they have already been increasingly to the fore over the past few months and have given clear signals with regard to some of their priorities. Xi, whose more relaxed style contrasts strikingly with the wooden manner of Hu Jintao, has already launched a new campaign against corruption, from senior to lower levels (or 'tigers' and 'flies', as he calls them).¹ Government officials are reported to be selling off their ill-gotten property portfolios ahead of the NPC.² Ostentatious displays of wealth have also been discouraged. He has emphasized that a key goal for the new leadership will be to improve public services and reduce China's astronomic social inequalities. Xi has also said that the party should be prepared to accept sharp criticism from the people and the media. This followed recent street protests about official censorship in Guangzhou Province. However, in December 2012, the authorities further tightened Internet restrictions.³ Over the last month, the international spotlight has again been on the activities of Chinese state agents in conducting cyber attacks and espionage abroad.⁴

The Chinese authorities have also recently announced that the 're-education through labour' system, under which police can jail minor offenders and political dissidents for up to four years without recourse to the courts, is to be abolished.⁵ Whether this really means abolition or, instead, a new legal basis for the system, remains to be seen. Hopes have also been expressed that China may soon ratify the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*.

Xi and Li clearly have no plans to introduce anything resembling Western democracy and are preoccupied in the main with repairing the legitimacy of continued Communist Party rule. After all, Xi is also a 'princeling', which would seem to place considerable limits on his

¹ "Xi Jinping vows to fight 'tigers' and 'flies' in anti-corruption drive", *Guardian*, 22 January 2013

² "China's Communist party cadres launch property fire sale", *Telegraph*, 21 January 2013

³ "China tightens internet controls", *Telegraph*, 28 December 2012

⁴ "[HCyber attacks blamed on ChinaH](#)", *BBC News Online*, 31 January 2013; "[HChina military unit 'behind prolific hackingH](#)", *BBC News Online*, 19 February 2013

⁵ "The long march to justice: China set to abolish forced labour camps", *Independent*, 8 January 2013

appetite for reform. A Bloomberg report published at the end of 2012 revealed that the families of eight princelings, including Xi's, had amassed great private wealth.⁶ In terms of foreign policy, Xi has made it very clear that China will be no less assertive than it has been under Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao. Tensions with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea have increased markedly in recent months and the genie of Chinese nationalism is now well and truly out of the bottle. But managing relations with the US will continue to be China's main geopolitical preoccupation under the new leadership and it won't want differences to spiral into open conflict.

It remains to be seen how big a change the new leadership will usher in. Another analyst, Cheng Li, warned last year: "[If the party doesn't transform itself, it faces a fatal blow](#)". To do this would require a dramatic shift in mindset. Despite Xi Jinping's early energy, nothing this dramatic seems likely. Cheng and others have argued that the top leadership over the past decade has largely coalesced around a strategy of '[muddling through](#)'. It is too early to say whether Xi will engender anything more coherent than that.

Cheng Li is far from completely pessimistic. He characterises the current period in China as one of "[power shift](#)", in which three potentially positive political trends have come to the fore. He sums them up in three short phrases: "weak leaders, strong factions"; "weak government, strong interest groups"; and "weak party, strong country". There have been reports that the overall succession process this time round involved increased levels of 'intra-party democracy' – that is, some kind of polling within the senior leadership cadre to gauge opinion about who should join the Politburo and its Standing Committee.⁷ However, Zhengxu Wang, observing the recently completed installation of new local leaderships in China's 31 Regions, argues that the process was striking for the absence of any concerted building up of a faction around Xi and an apparent emphasis on continuity and [promotion on grounds of merit](#).

Another analyst, Andreas Fulda, has claimed that there is also space for genuine debate about political reform in and around the party, provided it is expressed within a framework of 'loyalty' to the Communist Party, with a ten-year plan recently put forward by establishment intellectual Yu Jianrong containing significant [echoes of proposals set out in Charter 08](#). Fulda suggests that while the leading figures behind Charter 08 have been treated harshly by the authorities – not least, Liu Xiabao – it may be that some, if not all, of its ideas may be shaping discussions and could yet be partially or wholly appropriated. Since December 2012, two 'open letters' have also been published by a group of intellectuals, activists and journalists aimed at the new leadership, calling for a push on political reform. How the authorities respond will be an important test of the intentions of Xi and Li.⁸

All China experts agree that the country faces major challenges. Some are relatively optimistic that these challenges can be surmounted, others are more pessimistic. Overholt concluded his [article](#) last year as follows:

At the beginning of the Hu-Wen administration, I likened China to a man being chased by a tiger. If one focuses a camera on the man, one is awed by how fast he runs; surely he can outdistance anyone else. If, however, the camera focuses on the tiger (problems of environment, urbanisation, inequality, political demands, etc), one concludes that anything in front of that tiger will get eaten. Under Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji, the man far outdistanced the tiger, but then tired and needed a nap. Since

⁶ "Heirs of Communist China's eight immortals 'have amassed huge wealth'", *Telegraph*, 27 December 2012

⁷ "Party polls 370 members on choice of top leaders", *South China Morning Post*, 8 June 2012

⁸ "[HChina open letter calls for political reforms](#)", *BBC News Online*, 27 February 2013

then, while giving Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao full credit for historic achievements in developing the interior, overcoming the global financial crisis, developing world class public administration systems, and initiating environmental improvement programs, the nap of economic and political reform has persisted so long that the tiger is catching up. We are about to discover whether the tiger's approach will reveal prolonged Chinese lethargy or stimulate a new round of reforms that catapult China to world leadership.

3 Further reading

[“Meet the new Politburo Standing Committee”](#), Center for American Progress, 16 November 2013

Christopher K. Johnson, senior adviser and Freeman Chair in China Studies, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), testified on 7 February 2013 before a U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on [“China’s New Leadership and Implications for the United States”](#).

[“The Presidential Inbox: China's Leadership Transition”](#), Transcript of meeting at the Center for Foreign Relations featuring Elizabeth Economy, Cheng Li and Edward Luttwak, 22 February 2013

A.Greer Meisels, [Lessons learned in China from the collapse of the Soviet Union](#), China Studies Centre, University of Sydney, Policy Paper Series, January 2013

For up-to-date information on the Chinese economy, a useful source is [China Economic Focus – January 2013](#), the latest in a series of monthly reports published by the British Embassy in Beijing.