

The Case of Xi Jinping and the Mysterious Succession

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The conclusion of the Fourth Plenum of the 17th Central Committee in September without making widely anticipated leadership changes—especially with regard to Xi Jinping, the presumptive successor to top leader Hu Jintao—represented a significant departure from practices followed over the past 20 years in the highest echelon of PRC politics. Beijing has offered little by way of public explanation for its deviation from precedent, and in the resulting information void, the range of rumors and competing interpretations put forward in the independent Hong Kong press and by foreign observers has been correspondingly wide-ranging. Seen in the context of broader trends in leadership politics, and absent any indication that Xi has fallen out of favor, however, the plenum’s abstention from making leadership changes may reflect broader reforms in leadership selection procedures being implemented in anticipation of the Party’s 18th Congress in 2012.

The Fourth Plenum of the Chinese Communist Party’s 17th Central Committee met in Beijing 15–18 September 2009. The main item on the plenum’s agenda was endorsement of a long resolution on reform of the Party, entitled “Decision on a Number of Issues in Strengthening and Improving Party-Building in the New Situation,” the text of which was disseminated by the official news agency Xinhua on 27 September.

According to the 18 September press communiqué announcing the results of the plenum, Party Politburo Standing Committee member and PRC Vice President Xi Jinping delivered a speech on the “Decision” to the plenum. In addition, Party General Secretary Hu Jintao delivered a report on the work on the Party Politburo since the last plenum—a practice that has become routine since Hu took power in 2002—and also delivered an “important speech.” Neither Hu’s nor Xi’s speeches have been publicized in PRC media, although it is likely that at least portions of Hu’s “important speech” will eventually become available in the ongoing series *Selected Important Documents since the 17th Party Congress* (十七大以来重要文献选编).¹

Expectations

On 22 September—four days after the plenum closed—the Party took the unprecedented step of hosting a briefing on the plenum for foreign diplomats and journalists. A communist-controlled Hong Kong newspaper described the event, at which one of the briefers—Wang Changjiang, a specialist on Party reform at the Central Party School and one of the drafters of the plenum “Decision”—stated that changes in the leadership had not originally been on the agenda. Wang further stated that leadership changes need not

be made only at Central Committee plenums, but may be addressed at other venues, such as enlarged meetings (presumably of the Politburo). (*Ta Kung Pao*, 23 September).

Even so, practice over the past two decades shows that interim leadership changes at the level of the Politburo, the Party Secretariat, and the Central Military Commission (CMC) have routinely been made only at a Central Committee's fourth and—once, in 1995—fifth plenums, as table 1 (next page) indicates.²

This regularity in leadership changes at Party plenums is probably not due to any norm or regulation. It rather likely stems from the fact that the fourth plenum is the mid-term plenum in the usual seven-plenum sequence between Party congresses. By that logic, it may be too soon after the new leadership has been installed at the Central Committee's first plenum to contemplate leadership changes at the second and third plenums. Similarly, leadership changes after the fourth—or perhaps fifth—plenums would be considered as preparations for the upcoming Party congress already under way, and so it may be politically expedient simply to hold them until the congress. In any case, the fact remains that every fourth plenum since the 15th Party Congress has made the only top leadership changes that have occurred, with the single exception of the 1995 Fifth Plenum.

In that light, the recent Fourth Plenum might have been expected to take up several leadership adjustments:

- In addition to the appointment of Xi Jinping as CMC vice chairman, additions to the CMC membership might have been considered. According to the 1994 active service regulations for PLA officers, 70 is the normal retirement age for CMC members, extendible under special circumstances to 72. In 2012, Defense Minister Liang Guanglie and General Logistics Department Director Liao Xilong will be 72, Chen Bingde will be 71, and Li Jinai will reach 70. In addition, Vice Chairman Guo Boxiong will be 70, although there is no mandatory retirement provision for CMC vice chairmen. The Fourth Plenum might therefore have made appointments of younger officers overlapping with the officers they would replace in 2012.
- Before the Fourth Plenum, the independent, non-communist Hong Kong press speculated that Ling Jihua might be added to the Politburo as an alternate. This seems plausible because Ling, who was Hu Jintao's personal secretary, is head of the General Office, an extremely sensitive post, given its role in attending to leadership needs. By way of precedent, Zeng Qinghong, Jiang Zemin's General Office director and chief of his personal staff, was made a Politburo alternate at the 1997 15th Party Congress. Zeng was replaced as General Office director by Wang Gang in 1999, when Zeng was appointed head of the Organization Department. This Zeng-Wang change in 1999 lent credence not only to then circulating rumors that Jiang wanted Zeng promoted to full Politburo membership, but also to the notion that Jiang wanted Wang appointed as a

(text continues on p. 5)

Table 1*Politburo, Secretariat, & CMC Leadership Changes at Central Committee Plenums, 1992–2008*

14th Central Committee		
<i>CC Plenum, date</i>	<i>Main business</i>	<i>Leadership changes</i>
<i>First</i> , 19 October 1992	Elected new Politburo & Standing Committee, Secretariat & CMC	
<i>Second</i> , 5–7 March 1993	Approved premier's work report and nominated NPC & State Council leadership for 8 th National People's Congress	None
<i>Third</i> , 11–14 November 1993	Approved a 50-point decision on economic reform	None
<i>Fourth</i> , 25–28 September 1994	Approved a decision on party-building	Huang Ju added to Politburo; Wu Bangguo and Jiang Chunyun added to Secretariat
<i>Fifth</i> , 25–28 September 1995	Approved proposal for 9 th Five-Year Plan	Expelled Chen Xitong from Politburo and CCP; added Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian as CMC vice chairmen; added Wang Ke as CMC member
<i>Sixth</i> , 7–10 October 1996	Approved a resolution on socialist spiritual civilization	None
<i>Seventh</i> , 6–9 September 1997	Approved agenda and schedule of the 15 th CCP Congress	None
15th Central Committee		
<i>CC Plenum, date</i>	<i>Main business</i>	<i>Leadership changes</i>
<i>First</i> , 19 September 1997	Elected new Politburo & Standing Committee, Secretariat & CMC	
<i>Second</i> , 25–26 February 1997	Approved premier's work report and nominated NPC & State Council leadership for 9 th National People's Congress	None
<i>Third</i> , 12–14 October 1998	Approved resolution on agriculture & rural work	None
<i>Fourth</i> , 19–22 September 1999	Approved decision on state-owned enterprise reform	Hu Jintao appointed CMC vice chairman; Guo Boxing & Xu Caihou added as CMC members
<i>Fifth</i> , 9–11 October 2000	Approved proposal for 10 th Five-Year Plan	None
<i>Sixth</i> , 24–26 September 2001	Endorsed Jiang Zemin's 1 July 2001 party anniversary speech; discussed party-building	None

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Table 1 (continued)

<i>Seventh</i> , 3–5 November 2002	Approved agenda and schedule of 16 th CCP Congress	None
16th Central Committee		
<i>CC Plenum, date</i>	<i>Main business</i>	<i>Leadership changes</i>
<i>First</i> , 15 November 2002	Elected new Politburo & Standing Committee, Secretariat & CMC	
<i>Second</i> , 24–26 February 2003	Approved premier's work report and nominated NPC & State Council leadership for 10 th National People's Congress	None
<i>Third</i> , 11–14 October 2003	Approved decision on socialist market system	None
<i>Fourth</i> , 16–19 September 2004	Approved decision on strengthening CCP's governing capacity	Approved retirement of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao's appointment as CMC chairman; promoted Xu Caihou to CMC vice chairman; added Chen Bingde, Qian Qingchen, Zhang Dingfa & Jing Zhiyuan as CMC members
<i>Fifth</i> , 8–11 October 2005	Approved proposal for 11 th Five-Year Plan	None
<i>Sixth</i> , 8–11 October 2006	Approved decision on building socialist harmonious society	None
<i>Seventh</i> , 9–12 October 2007	Approved the agenda and schedule of the 17 th CCP Congress	Endorsed decision by Politburo on 26 July to expel Chen Liangyu
17th Central Committee		
<i>CC Plenum, date</i>	<i>Main business</i>	<i>Leadership changes</i>
<i>First</i> , 22 October 2007	Elected new Politburo & Standing Committee, Secretariat & CMC	
<i>Second</i> , 25–27 February 2008	Approved premier's work report and nominated NPC & State Council leadership for 11 th National People's Congress	None
<i>Third</i> , 9–12 October 2008	Approved decision on rural policy	None

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Politburo alternate. In any case, Wang was finally made an alternate member of the 16th Politburo in 2002, and then was promoted to full Politburo membership at the 17th Congress in 2007, when he was also replaced by Ling Jihua as General Office chief. It may be a reasonable surmise, therefore, that Hu would have liked Ling appointed as a Politburo alternate at the Fourth Plenum.

Precedents for Xi Jinping CMC Appointment

The appointment of Xi Jinping as vice chairman of the CMC was expected not on the basis of explicit Party constitutional stipulations for leadership succession but rather on the basis of precedents set in the preparation of Hu Jintao over a 10-year period to succeed Jiang Zemin, as follows:

- At the 14th CCP Congress in 1992, Hu was appointed in a “helicopter” promotion to the Politburo Standing Committee, having never served previously on the Politburo, and was made executive secretary of the Secretariat. In December 1992, he was appointed president of the Central Party School. He was reappointed to these positions at the 15th Party Congress.
- At the 9th NPC in March 1998, Hu was appointed vice president of the PRC, second to President Jiang Zemin.
- At the 15th Central Committee’s Fourth Plenum in 1999, Hu was appointed CMC vice chairman.

Because of these staggered appointments, by the time Hu succeeded Jiang as Party general secretary in 2002, he had 10 years’ experience running the Party apparatus; by the time he replaced Jiang as PRC president in 2003, he had served five years as vice president; and by the time he succeeded Jiang as chair of the party and state CMCs in 2004–2005, he had five years’ service as vice chairman. The pattern of staggered appointments in the Jiang-Hu transition, moreover, seemed to be based on the precedent set by Deng Xiaoping’s retirement from the Politburo Standing Committee in 1987 and from the party and state CMCs in 1989–1990.

The pattern of Xi Jinping’s appointments up to the Fourth Plenum replicated the pattern of Hu’s appointments, suggesting that the same pattern of staggered appointments to key posts was being used to prepare him to succeed Hu Jintao in 2012–2015. At the 2007 17th Party Congress, Xi was added to the Politburo Standing Committee without having served previously on the Politburo and was made executive secretary of the Secretariat. In December 2007, he was made president of the Central Party School. And in March 2008, Xi was appointed PRC vice president. It was a plausible surmise, therefore, that he would be made a CMC vice chairman at the Fourth Plenum.

Xi's Activities as Presumptive Successor

As in the case of Hu Jintao during his decade of preparation to succeed Jiang Zemin, Xi's status as Hu's intended successor could be inferred not only from the pattern of his appointments but also from his activities since the 17th Party Congress. As with Hu before him, Xi's foremost role has been to assist the general secretary in running the party apparatus, principally as head of the Secretariat. In that role, Xi presented the lists of Politburo nominations for the leading NPC and State Council posts at the February 2008 Second Plenum, preceding the convocation of the 11th NPC the following month. Xi has served as head of the Party-Building Leading Small Group, as Hu Jintao did from 1992 to 2002. He has also directed the Party's 18-month campaign to study the "scientific development concept," launched in September 2007, and he delivered the keynote speech at a forum marking the Party's 88th anniversary on 30 June this year.³

In addition, since 2007 Xi has also served as deputy head of the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, under Hu Jintao, and has also directed the Hong Kong-Macao Leading Small Group. Since February 2008, Xi presided over the leadership group directing preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Finally, up to the Fourth Plenum, Xi traveled abroad on state visits twice. In June 2008, he went to Pyongyang—a visit that included a meeting with North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong Il—as well as Mongolia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Yemen. In February 2009 he visited Mexico (where he had a testy exchange with the foreign press), Jamaica, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, and Malta, with a stopover in Fiji.

Contrary to the conclusion of some observers in the independent Hong Kong press, Xi's speech at the Fourth Plenum explaining the "Decision" on party-building does not demonstrate that Xi remains the presumptive successor to Hu Jintao. His delivery of the speech stemmed instead from the fact that the topic of the plenum decision fell within his area of leadership responsibility—the Party apparatus—and, more specifically, from the fact that he directed the drafting team that produced the document. This was consistent with longstanding Party practice. For example:

- At the 2003 Third Plenum of the 16th Central Committee, Wen Jiabao made the explanatory speech on the decision on economic reform adopted at the plenum, while NPC Chairman Wu Bangguo made the explanation for a proposal to revise the PRC constitution.
- At the 2004 Fourth Plenum, Zeng Qinghong (then executive secretary of the Secretariat and head of the Party-Building Leading Small Group) provided the explanation of the decision of building the Party's "governing capacity."
- At the 2005 Fifth Plenum, Wen Jiabao delivered the explanation of the proposal for the 11th Five-Year Plan.

- And at the 2006 Sixth Plenum, Wu Bangguo provided the explanation of the decision on “socialist harmonious society,” a document whose drafting he directed.

Since the Fourth Plenum, nevertheless, PRC media have so far given every indication that Xi’s standing has not changed. He has continued to serve in his Party roles, including as director of the ongoing campaign to study the “scientific development concept,” now in its third and final stage. On 5 October, he began his third foreign trip, this time to Belgium, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania.

Prospects

It is tempting to see, as some observers have, the absence of leadership appointments at the Fourth Plenum as indicating an outbreak of factional infighting, whereby Hu Jintao has begun to unravel previous consensus arrangements for the succession of Xi Jinping—a candidate not of his choosing—in favor of one who is, perhaps his crony Politburo Standing Committee member Li Keqiang. By that interpretation, Hu and his expanding Communist Youth League (CYL) faction, of which Li Keqiang is part, is seeking to overturn of the succession of Xi, who supposedly represents a coalition of Jiang Zemin’s “Shanghai gang” and the so-called princelings faction (太子党)—the purported club of sons and daughters of the veteran revolutionaries who founded the PRC.

This line of interpretation is open to several counter-arguments. First, there has been so far no clear evidence that Hu Jintao has been working to undermine Xi on behalf of Li Keqiang or another crony. The delineation between Xi’s responsibilities in Party affairs and Li’s responsibilities as executive vice premier has been clear-cut and consistent since their appointments, suggesting that the arrangements for the dual succession as general secretary and premier in 2012–13 remains on track. In addition, with regard to the often cited “princeling faction,” one wonders what ideals and interests bind such a group together beyond their “red blood lines.” In that regard, the reality of a coherent “princeling faction” seems as credible in Chinese politics as a faction that combined American princelings Al Gore and George W. Bush in U.S. politics in 2000.

Current trends in leadership politics, moreover, show little evidence of mounting factional conflict. Trends have in fact pointed in the opposite direction, to a concerted effort to sustain at least a public façade of unity in the face of the economic downturn in the past year and the stresses in Chinese society that have resulted.⁴ Finally, attempts to undo at mid-term what appears to have been consensus arrangements for Xi Jinping’s succession would have costly consequences. The outbreak of open factional conflict at the top would inevitably invite doubts about the leadership in a period of economic uncertainty and ignite competition and conflict among ambitious political climbers among the Party’s broader rank and file.

Changing Procedures?

If factional conflict does not offer an entirely satisfying explanation for the outcome of the Fourth Plenum, it is worth considering alternatives. One may be that the Party's procedures are changing. Specifically, reform of Party leadership processes has been a distinctive element of political reform under Hu's aegis since the beginning of his tenure as general secretary. And so it may be that Xi Jinping's succession remains on track but now is playing out under new procedures of leadership selection heading into the 18th CCP Congress.

In that regard, Hu Jintao's report to the 17th Party Congress in 2007 spelled out a number of forthcoming changes in leadership processes, elaborating on the generalities included in Jiang Zemin's report to the 16th Congress. The Fourth Plenum's long "Decision" on Party reform refined Hu's formulations further. With regard to leadership selection processes, Jiang's report had simply called for efforts to "reform and improve the intra-Party election system" (改革和完善党内选举制度). Hu's 2007 congress report went further, specifying steps to "reform the intra-Party election system and improve the system for nominating candidates and electoral methods" (改革党内选举制度, 改进候选人提名制度和选举方式). Somewhat more elaborately, the Fourth Plenum document states that the Party will "perfect the intra-Party election methods, improve and regularize the election procedures and voting methods, and improve the nominating methods" (完善党内选举发, 改进和规范选举程序和投票方式, 改进候选人介绍办法).

In 2006, Zhou Ruijin, a former deputy editor of *People's Daily* famous as author of several reform-oriented articles under the by-line "Huangfu Ping," published an article on the internet calling on the CCP to emulate reforms of Party leadership processes adopted by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP).⁵ Zhou took particular note that the 10th VCP Congress, convened in June 2006, had re-appointed its general secretary, Nong Duc Manh, through competitive multi-candidate election. Taking this as a yardstick of the progress of "inner-Party democracy" in the VCP, Zhou asked in conclusion, "Isn't the gap between the VCP and CCP too wide?" Zhou's provocation received no authoritative response in PRC media, but it was clear that Party reform was broadly discussed in the 2006–2007 run-up to the 17th Congress.

What did emerge by way of "inner-Party democratic reform" of leadership selection mechanisms was the use of a straw poll to nominate candidates for the new Politburo to be elected at the 17th Congress and the First Plenum of the 17th Central Committee. According to a Xinhua report transmitted after the close of the 17th Congress, on 25 June 2007, Hu Jintao presided over a meeting of some 400 members and alternates of the 16th Central Committee and "relevant responsible comrades" who voted on a "recommendation ballot" of nearly 200 names. This procedure of "democratic recommendation" (民主推荐) produced a short list of names that subsequently the Politburo and its Standing Committee took into consideration in compiling the final list of candidates submitted to the 17th Congress. Xinhua heralded the straw poll procedure as providing "experience in perfecting the mechanism for selecting party and state leaders and promoting the institutionalization, standardization, and proceduralization [制度化, 规范

化,程序化] of the replacement of high-level party and state veterans with younger ones,” and as having “great significance for further developing inner-Party democracy and perfecting the inner-Party democratic system.”⁶ And according to several unconfirmed accounts, Xi Jinping was selected as successor designate in part because he received the most straw poll votes among new candidates.

In this context, it seems plausible that the Fourth Plenum’s deviation from precedent with regard to Xi Jinping reflects new reforms in the leadership selection processes heading into the 2012 18th Party Congress, building on the straw poll procedure used preceding the 17th Congress. Alternatively, it may instead be that the Fourth Plenum outcome reflects Hu Jintao’s attempt to use the membership of the 17th Central Committee to overturn the result of the straw poll among the members of the 16th Central Committee in favor of his own candidate for successor.⁷

At this point, only time will tell whether the outcome of the Fourth Plenum with regard to Xi Jinping reflects changing Party procedures or is the product of traditional factional conflict. The two explanations are not, in fact, mutually contradictory. Conceivably, Hu may be pressing “inner-Party democracy” and promoting new, as yet undisclosed procedures for leadership selection to advance his own cronies and ensure continuity with his preferred policy directions once he steps down. But for the time being, we can only speculate.

Notes

¹ The first of an anticipated three volumes under the title *Selected Important Documents since the 17th Party Congress* (十七大以来重要文献选编) was published by the Central Committee’s Documents Research Office in September 2009 and included speeches and documents from the period since the October 2007 17th Party Congress through the end of 2008. The second volume, which may include Hu’s Fourth Plenum speech, would likely appear in 2011. This title is part of an ongoing documentary series that began with *Selected Important Documents Since the Third Plenum*, published in September 1982 in the PRC’s internal (内部) publications system. Subsequent titles in the series, which gathers leaders’ speeches and authoritative Party documents from each successive Central Committee, have been published in China’s open publishing system. Although each title in the series contains many speeches and documents that have been published previously, several have not, making this a useful source for leadership politics.

² Most Central Committee plenums remove disgraced members and promote alternate members to full membership of the Central Committee itself.

³ On this study campaign, see the article “Leadership Presses Party Unity in Time of Economic Stress,” *China Leadership Monitor*, No.28 (Spring 2009).

⁴ On this score, see the article “Leadership Sustains Public Unity Amid Stress,” *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 29 (Summer 2009).

⁵ 黄甫平, “越南改革值得关注” (Vietnam’s Reforms Deserve Attention), 多维新闻 (*Duowei News*), 12 July 2006.

⁶ Liu Siyang 刘思扬, Sun Chengbin 孙承斌, and Liu Gang 刘刚, “为了党和国家兴旺发达长治久安—党的新一届中央领导机构产生纪录” (To Make Long-Term Stability of the Party and State Flourish—A Chronicle of How the New Leadership Was Brought Forth), *Xinhua*, 23 October 2007; for an OSC translation, see CPP20071023354001.

⁷ I am grateful to Joe Fewsmith, who suggested this alternative scenario to me.