

The Preparation of Li Keqiang

Alice Miller

The Fourth Plenum departed from precedent in failing to appoint Politburo Standing Committee member and PRC Vice President Xi Jinping to the Party's military decision-making body, and so provoked speculation that Party General Secretary Hu Jintao is maneuvering to have his crony Li Keqiang succeed him rather than Xi. A close examination of the roles and activities of Li Keqiang in the Chinese leadership since his appointment to the Politburo Standing Committee at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, however, shows that he has been engaged almost exclusively in the work of the State Council, the PRC state's executive arm, under the supervision of Premier Wen Jiabao, while Xi Jinping has assumed responsibility for running the Party apparatus under the direction of Hu Jintao. This rigorous division of labor has not changed in the months since the plenum. This evidence, together with other indications in PRC media of Xi's status, suggests that Xi remains Hu's heir apparent and that Li continues to prepare to succeed Wen Jiabao as premier.

Up to the 17th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in September 2009, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership appeared to be following the precedents of Hu Jintao's successive appointments in the 1990s, on his way to becoming the Party's top leader in 2002, in promoting Xi Jinping into the top leadership since 2007. Replicating the precise sequence of Hu's staged promotions, Xi was appointed a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, executive secretary of the Party's Secretariat, and president of the Central Party School in 2007, and then made vice president of the PRC at the 11th National People's Congress (NPC) in 2008. That pattern was the basis for the expectation that he would be added to the Central Military Commission (CMC) at the Fourth Plenum, paralleling the precedent of Hu Jintao's appointment to that body in 1999. The concurrent appointment of Li Keqiang to the Politburo Standing Committee, ranking just below Xi, in 2007, and as executive vice premier in 2008, suggested that the leadership was preparing a dual succession: Xi would succeed Hu Jintao as Party general secretary at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 and Li would succeed Premier Wen Jiabao at the 12th National People's Congress in 2013.

The Fourth Plenum's break from precedent muddied this picture and raised doubts about Xi's status as Hu Jintao's unnamed heir apparent.¹ In the wake of the plenum, several statements by Party spokesmen to the Hong Kong and foreign media discounted the force of the precedents of Hu's rise to China's top leadership positions a decade ago as binding on leadership choices today in arranging leadership succession ahead, especially in a context of the Hu leadership's efforts to reform and institutionalize internal Party procedures and processes. Nevertheless, some Hong Kong and foreign observers have gone further and surmised that the failure of the Fourth Plenum to add Xi

to the CMC indicates that Hu Jintao is now seeking to overturn Xi's succession in favor of Li Keqiang.

Li Keqiang

If Li Keqiang were now being pressed as a contender to succeed Hu, one might expect to see some attempt to broaden his work responsibilities to include functions that prepare him and demonstrate his readiness to assume the functions that Hu Jintao performs as Party leader, head of state, and military decision-maker. Such an effort would necessarily blur the sharp division of work allotted between Li Keqiang and Xi Jinping since the Party congress in 2007. So far, that has not been the case.

In the immediate wake of his appointment to the Politburo at the 17th CCP Congress in October 2007, Li made very few public appearances, a limbo that indicated he was awaiting appointment at the 11th NPC the following March. This impression was reinforced, moreover, by Li's promotion onto the Politburo Standing Committee at the Party congress, which—given the normal division of policy labor among members of that body—indicated that he would become the first-ranking executive vice premier, working directly with Premier Wen Jiabao.

These expectations were confirmed by the 11th NPC's appointments to the State Council in March 2008. Li was appointed the front-ranking among four vice premiers. He immediately began a heavy schedule of frequent public appearances in that role, of speaking responsibilities on behalf of himself and of the premier, of meetings with foreign leaders and foreign travel in connection with State Council business, and as authoritative spokesman on the entire range of government affairs, including the economy, energy, environment, health care issues, food safety, and climate change.

In addition, Li appears to be Wen Jiabao's deputy in presiding over the powerful Central Committee Finance and Economy Leading Small Group.² Li also serves as Wen's deputy in leading the National Leading Group for Climate Change Response, Energy Conservation, and Pollution Reduction Work, an important body that prepared Beijing's approach to the Copenhagen summit on climate change in December 2009.

In addition, Li has assumed leadership of at least eight other State Council policy coordination groups. These are:

- Director, State Council South-to-North Water Diversion Project
- Director, State Council Second National Economic Census Leading Group
- Director, State Council Second National Land Survey Leading Group
- Director, State Council Medicine and Health Care Systems Reform Leading Group
- Chairman, Three Gorges Dam Project Construction Committee
- Chairman, State Council AIDS Prevention and Treatment Work Committee
- Chairman, National Patriotic Health Movement Committee

- Chairman, China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development

Many of Li's public appearances are in connection with these specific policy sectors. For example, he has been the frontline spokesman cited in PRC media on China's response to the threat of AIDS and the H1N1 virus, and on 1 December 2009 accompanied Premier Wen in that capacity in visiting AIDS patients in a Beijing hospital. On 11 November 2009, Li delivered the keynote speech at the annual meeting of the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, stressing the need for China to adapt to the emerging "revolution in clean energy, energy saving, emission-reducing and other new technology." (Xinhua, 11 November 2009)

Li has also emerged as an authoritative spokesman, second only to Wen Jiabao, on Beijing's economic policy line. On 11 December 2009, for example, Li delivered the summary speech to a forum of several provincial leaders convened to review the guidelines for economic work in the coming year set down at the annual central conference on economic work earlier that month (Xinhua, 11 December 2009). As he had in January 2009, on 11 January Li again delivered the keynote speech to the annual national conference on finance work (Xinhua, 12 January 2010). As all members of the Politburo Standing Committee do, Li undertakes periodic inspection tours of China's provinces. During these trips, Li's publicized remarks almost always deal with economic policy issues as they pertain to the local conditions he observes.

Li's foreign travels and interactions with visiting foreigners have similarly been focused on his role in the State Council. Li has traveled abroad four times since becoming vice premier in March 2008:

- In December 2008 he took his first trip, visiting Indonesia, Egypt and Kuwait, during which his discussions focused on economic and energy issues.
- In June 2009 he visited Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Finland, again discussing energy and economic issues.
- In November 2009 he visited Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea, discussing regional economic cooperation and attending the opening of the PRC-sponsored Confucius Institute at Canterbury University.
- In January 2010 he attended the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland. In 2009, as the world economic crisis was unfolding, Wen Jiabao attended the Davos meeting.

In addition, a review of Li's meetings with foreigners visiting Beijing over the past eight months shows that, despite his status as a high-ranking CCP leader, he has not been publicized meeting any visiting party leaders or delegations. All of his interactions have been in his capacity as vice premier and with visitors from foreign national and local governments, from international organizations, or former state officials.

In broad respects, the scope and specifics of Li Keqiang's activities replicate those of Wen Jiabao in the 1998–2003 period, though with some differences. For one

thing, Wen was not executive vice premier under Zhu Rongji. Instead, Li Lanqing served in that capacity, but, as a longtime expert on China's foreign trade, he owed his standing in part to Beijing's ongoing efforts to gain membership in the World Trade Organization, and was expected to retire at the end of his term because of age. Wen did serve as secretary-general on the Central Committee's Finance and Economy Leading Small Group, behind Zhu Rongji and Vice Premier Wu Bangguo, and also chaired that body's Finance Leading Small Group. In the current configuration of the State Council executive committee (which includes the premier, vice premiers, and state councilors), Li has no obvious competition for the post of premier. All three of the other vice premiers—Hui Liangyu, Zhang Dejiang, and Wang Qishan—are in their early to mid-60s and so are likely to retire (in Hui's and Zhang's cases) or could not serve more than one term as premier without violating age limits.

Xi Jinping since the Fourth Plenum

From the start, Xi's foremost role has been to assist Hu Jintao 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. As Hu did during his preparation to assume power, Xi also presides over the Central Party School, a position from which he has the opportunity to establish relationships with the Party's rising generation of future leaders and to direct policy research serving the top leadership.

As Hu Jintao did from 1992 to 2002, Xi serves as head of the Party-Building Leading Small Group. In that capacity, Xi directed the drafting team that produced the "Decision" on Party reform adopted at the Fourth Plenum and delivered the report at the plenum explaining the document's purposes. Xi has also directed the Party's 18-month campaign to study the "scientific development concept," launched in September 2007 and presently winding down. In addition, Xi serves as deputy head of the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, under Hu Jintao, and directs the Hong Kong-Macao Leading Small Group. Starting in February 2008, Xi presided over the leadership group directing preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

More broadly, Xi's speeches and remarks to domestic audiences focus heavily on Party affairs and political issues, in contrast to Li's concentration on economic and related matters. Xi's publicized comments during routine inspection tours of China's provinces normally address Party concerns, such as the ongoing campaign to study the "scientific development concept" and the need for intra-party democracy. On 30 June 2009, Xi delivered the keynote speech at a forum marking the Party's 88th anniversary.

Since his appointment to the Politburo Standing Committee and as PRC vice president, Xi has traveled abroad on state visits four times, including two trips since the Fourth Plenum. In June 2008 he went to Pyongyang—a visit that included a meeting with North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-il—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. In October 2009 Xi visited Belgium, Germany, Hungary, and Romania, and in December 2009 he visited Japan, South Korea, Cambodia, and Myanmar. On these visits, because of his status as PRC vice president, Xi has consistently met higher-ranking state officials—including heads of state and the emperor of Japan—than Li Keqiang has in his travels. In his capacity as Politburo Standing Committee member, he has also met with leaders of foreign political parties, which Li Keqiang has not. Xi’s conversations with foreign leaders routinely cover the entire range of international and policy issues of concern to both sides, while Li’s conversations have been more strictly circumscribed. Finally, Xi has received a far broader range of foreign visitors in Beijing, including leaders and delegations of foreign political parties.

The scope and focus of Xi Jinping’s work responsibilities and activities since the 2007 Party congress down to the Fourth Plenum indicated that he was being prepared to succeed Hu Jintao as paramount leader in the 2012–2015 period. Xi’s continued performance of these roles since the Fourth Plenum indicates that he continues to be the presumptive heir. This implication seemed to be signaled in a commentary in the PRC-controlled Hong Kong newspaper *Wen Wei Po* on 18 December 2009 regarding Xi’s reception by Japanese Emperor Akihito during his visit to Tokyo that month, a meeting that the Japanese press saw as a consequence of Tokyo’s bending to last-minute pressure from Beijing. Noting that Xi’s visit was the first by a top Chinese leader to Tokyo since the Japan Democratic Party cabinet under Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio took power, *Wen Wei Po* dismissed the controversy over the meeting with the emperor as a product of domestic political infighting in Tokyo. But it also acknowledged that “China and Japan were rather late in finalizing Xi Jinping’s itinerary” and that Beijing had “proposed a meeting with the emperor in order to boost the significance of the trip.” During the trip, *Wen Wei Po* observed, Xi both expounded on the strategic importance of Sino-Japanese relations and also “manifested the confidence, steadiness, and modesty of *a future Chinese leader*” (一个未来中国领袖的自信,稳重, 和谦逊; italics added).

A Military Role for Xi?

While the Fourth Plenum departed from precedent in failing to name Xi to the CMC, there have been small but suggestive indications that he is beginning to assume interactions in the military arena. The most tantalizing of these was his 26 October 2009 meeting with visiting Vietnamese military leader Le Van Dung. Dung is a lieutenant general in the Vietnamese People’s Army (VPA), a standing committee member of the Central Military Commission of the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP), head of the VPA General Political Department, and the Party secretary for military affairs on the VCP Secretariat. According to Xinhua’s account, Xi saluted the “strategic cooperative partnership” between Beijing and Hanoi and expressed his hope that the Chinese PLA and VPA “would enhance exchanges, increase mutual trust, and make contributions to cementing and developing bilateral ties.”

By strict protocol, Dung, as a military leader, might not have been received by Xi

at all or, at best, in Xi's capacity as head of the CCP Secretariat (the counterpart of the VCP Secretariat). But Xi was reported receiving Dung in his capacity as Politburo member and vice president, not as head of the Secretariat.³ In addition, Dung's other reported meetings in Beijing were strictly with high-ranking PLA leaders—Minister of National Defense Li Guanglie and General Political Department Director Li Jinai, both of whom are CMC members.

Implications

The continuation of Xi Jinping and Wen Jiabao in their respective roles suggests that they continue to prepare for what is intended as a succession in tandem in 2012 and after. It does not entirely rule out the possibility, as some observers have proposed, that Hu Jintao is working to overturn Xi's succession on behalf of his crony Li Keqiang—only that Hu has not yet sought to alter Li's work routines to improve his credentials to succeed to the top Party, state, and military posts.

However, the costs of overturning what appear to have been consensus-driven arrangements set down at the 17th Party Congress in October 2007 for leadership succession in 2012–2013 would seem to be high. China's political order now governs a far more complex economy and society than in Mao's day, when succession was always subject to the personal whims and shifting political preferences of the great helmsman. Governance in China today requires far greater stability and predictability in politics—including in the politics of leadership succession—than in the Mao era. In his day, Deng Xiaoping worked mightily to establish institutionalized political processes to constrain the rise of a Stalin or Mao-like dictator in a collective leadership and to prevent a return to the free-for-all leadership conflict that characterized the last two decades of Mao's rule. In addition, Beijing has a powerful interest in projecting political stability in a period of economic stress at home and internationally and of strategic uncertainty and potential transition in the global structure of power. Hu Jintao as well as anyone certainly understands these things; much of his tenure as top leader has been devoted to managing such priorities.

In that regard, it may be, as was previously discussed in the *Monitor*, that Hu is working to establish new, more institutionalized and “democratic” procedures for promoting top leaders. In that light, the failure of the Fourth Plenum may indicate that such new procedures will be deployed at making the next wave of CCP leadership appointments in the pending transition in 2012–2013. It is also possible that Hu is simultaneously using such new procedures to bend the outcome in favor of his crony Li Keqiang.⁴ If so, however (unless Li Keqiang's portfolio of work responsibilities broadens soon), it would seem that Hu would be pressing for the succession of a leader with far fewer credentials by way of preparation and experience relevant to the top posts—a leader also tagged with the taint of cronyism—in place of one deliberately prepared in those roles to succeed and whose credentials would seem to make his succession a foregone conclusion.

Notes

¹ For analyses of the Fourth Plenum's failure to appoint Xi Jinping to the Central Military Commission, see the articles by this author and by James Mulvenon in *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 30 (Fall 2009).

² PRC media do not routinely report the current memberships of any of the several leading small groups of the Party Central Committee, including this one. But Li's appointment is consistent with past staffing of the Finance and Economy Leading Small Group and is attested to by two unofficial mainland directories, as well as by non-communist Hong Kong media. See "The CCP Central Committee's Leading Small Groups," in *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 26 (Fall 2008).

³ In contrast to Xinhua's Chinese-language dispatch and the account in *People's Daily*, Xinhua's English-language dispatch identified Xi only as vice president.

⁴ See "The Case of Xi Jinping and the Mysterious Succession," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 30 (Fall 2009), 8–9.