

The King Is Dead! Long Live the King! The CMC Leadership Transition from Jiang to Hu

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At the 2004 fall plenum, Jiang Zemin finally stepped down as chairman of the party Central Military Commission (CMC), abdicating the position to Hu Jintao, who now possesses the holy trinity of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership positions: CCP general secretary, People's Republic of China (PRC) president, and party CMC chairman. Jiang is also widely expected to relinquish the ceremonial chairmanship of the state Central Military Commission at the National People's Congress (NPC) meeting in March 2005. This essay analyzes the origins, documents, and dynamics of the transition, and ponders the implications of Jiang's impending "total retirement" for civil-military relations and military modernization.

Introduction

As I explored in *CLM 5*, Jiang Zemin retained his chairmanship of the Central Military Commission at the 16th Party Congress meeting in 2002, while handing over the CCP general secretaryship and later the state presidency to Hu Jintao.¹ The negative repercussions of this move were highlighted in *CLM 7*, which documented an internal party dissatisfaction with "two centers" of leadership,² and *CLM 8*, which tracked Hu and Jiang's jockeying for power and influence during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Ming 361 crises.³ Throughout these events, Jiang clearly drew inspiration from Deng Xiaoping's precedents, beginning with his initial partial retirement:

Recall that at the 13th Party Congress in 1987, confident of his preeminence in the system, Deng retired from all formal positions save one, the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission. His logic at the time was clear. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) was still subordinate to party control, but the fresh memory of the breakdown of formal lines of authority during the events in Tiananmen Square told Deng that his continued personal control of the military was crucially important to Jiang Zemin's successful transition to the leadership core. Deng retained his position for two years, relinquishing his party CMC chairmanship at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 13th Central Committee in November 1989 and his state CMC chairmanship at the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh National People's Congress in March 1990.⁴

The easy extrapolation (though this author cannot claim the steely courage to have made the prediction) would have been to forecast that Jiang Zemin would retire two years into the 16th Central Committee in fall 2004. And so it goes ...

Jiang Steps Down

On September 19, 2004, Xinhua News Agency published the text of Jiang's letter to the Politburo, dated September 1, 2004, requesting permission to resign as chairman of the Central Military Commission. In a continuing paean to Deng Xiaoping's legacy, the first paragraph of Jiang's letter used the same wording that Deng's resignation letter used in 1989. Jiang cited a number of reasons for resigning, including "the long-term peace and stability of the party and state," as well as a desire to achieve "the institutionalization, standardization, and proceduralization of the succession of new high-ranking party and state leaders."⁵ He claimed to have informed the Central Committee of his desire to retire from all official positions prior to the 16th Party Congress in fall 2002, but cited the "complicated and ever-changing international situation" and the "heavy tasks of national defense and army building" as the reasons why the Central Committee "decided" that Jiang should retain chairmanship of the CMC until fall 2004.⁶ Deflecting the oft-repeated criticism that he retained his military position as a way to retain power and maintain leverage over Hu Jintao, Jiang asserted that he had "always respected and supported the work of the central leadership collective" and was "looking forward to ... complete retirement from leadership positions."⁷ He also explicitly nominated Hu Jintao to replace him as CMC chairman, complimenting the general secretary as "completely qualified for the post" and insisting that the recentralization of leadership over the military under the current general secretary of the CCP was "good for upholding the fundamental principle and system of the party's absolute leadership over the army."⁸



江主席和基层战士一起亲切交谈

Accounts of the enlarged CMC meeting at which the handover was formalized offered other insights.⁹ In his speech, Jiang insisted that the “three-in-one leadership system under which the party general secretary, state president, and CMC chairman is the same person” was “not only necessary” but the “most appropriate method.” Jiang also elaborated on the rationale for his retention of the CMC chairmanship at the 16th Party Congress. In having employed what he described as a “tight grasp,” Jiang claimed to have wanted to “settle some major matters in the buildup of the armed forces, to lay a better foundation, and to create more complete conditions for handing over the duties.”¹⁰ Jiang also had even kinder words for the recipient of the handover, Hu Jintao, describing him as “in the prime of life,” “outstandingly effective,” “young and energetic,” “meticulous,” and possessing “rich leading experience” and “excellent qualifications.”¹¹ He closed his speech with some personal emotional reflections about the previous 15 years, and a list of “hopes” for the future of the armed forces, including the party’s absolute control over the military, a “revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics,” and defense of national sovereignty, among others.¹²



中共中央总书记、国家主席、中央军委主席胡锦涛在军队工作会议上作重要讲话

For his part, Hu Jintao was gracious in victory, complimenting Jiang as someone who “is able to stand tall, see far, and think deeply.” He thanked Jiang for his “historic contributions,” in particular his role in “systematizing, standardizing, and providing procedures for the handover of senior leadership positions from old to new in our party, our government and our army.”¹³ Indeed, Hu referred to Jiang’s retreat from public life as a “glorious example of exemplary conduct and nobility of character and profound breadth of vision.”¹⁴

Analysis and Implications

There are competing theories to explain the timing and motivation for Jiang’s retirement. The first and easiest was outlined above, namely that Jiang sought to mimic Deng Xiaoping’s legacy to the smallest detail, including the length of his retention of the CMC

position. Indeed, unconfirmed accounts suggest that Deng's family publicly highlighted the time period of his CMC chairmanship during the activities marking the 100th anniversary of his birth in 2004. It must be noted that Jiang's explicitly stated rationales for staying on in the first place—the complicated international situation (especially Taiwan) and the pressing demands of army-building—have not declined in importance, and in the case of Taiwan the situation has actually worsened by some metrics, so he cannot simply claim victory and retire. A second, more gossipy explanation, favored by the usual suspects in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore but also referenced by some knowledgeable insiders in Beijing, is that the Jiang-Hu split was paralyzing (dire version) or unnecessarily complicating (more polite version) all manner of military and nonmilitary policymaking in Beijing. According to this explanation, internal pressures and external perceptions forced Jiang to relinquish his position in the name of party stability.

As for the future, it is widely expected that Jiang Zemin will retire from the powerless state Central Military Commission at the National People's Congress in March 2005. In his letter to the Politburo requesting permission to resign as party CMC chairman, he offered to “resign as chairman of the Central Military Commission of the PRC.”¹⁵ A PRC-owned media outlet in Hong Kong reported that the 13th Session of the 10th NPC, meeting in Beijing on December 29, 2004, had proposed deliberating on Jiang Zemin's request to resign as state Central Military Commission chairman and electing a new chairman as main topics for the March agenda.¹⁶ There is no reason to believe that the Politburo will deny this request; Jiang's “total retirement” should then be complete.

The implications of Jiang's formal retreat from the scene are less clear-cut. From a process perspective, it is a remarkable step forward in the institutionalization of generational change. While one could have hoped for a cleaner transition in which Jiang gave up all posts at the 16th Party Congress, this outcome is the second- or third-best option. He can try to engage in “elder politics” from the sidelines, but such a personalistic strategy seems passé and unlikely to function effectively in the fourth generation system of bureaucratic technocracy. A key indicator was the failure of Zeng Qinghong to be elected to the Central Military Commission, which would have signaled that Jiang was attempting or able to keep his people in positions of influence. Instead, it seems more likely that Hu will genuinely assume greater control over the party, state, and military systems, though his admittedly ambiguous background does not suggest major changes in China's military modernization plans or security and foreign policies.

New CMC Appointments and Structural Changes

The Fourth Plenum of the 16th CCP Central Committee witnessed some important personnel moves and structural modifications to the Central Military Commission. In addition to Hu Jintao succeeding Jiang Zemin as chairman, Xu Caihou joined Guo Boxiong and Cao Gangchuan as vice chairman.¹⁷ General Armaments Department (GAD) Director Li Jinai moved over to replace Xu as director of the General Political Department (GPD), and in a surprising move, Jinan Military Region Commander Chen

Bingde was added to the commission to replace Li Jinai as head of the GAD.¹⁸ Born in July 1941, Chen Bingde is a native of Nantong, Jiangsu Province. He joined the PLA in April 1961 and the CCP in March 1962. He became major general in September 1988 and lieutenant general in July 1995. He was appointed commander of the Nanjing Military Region in January 1996 and commander of the Jinan Military Region in December 1999. One Hong Kong source suggested that his promotion could be partly explained by the Jinan Military Region's "enthusiastic promotion of the military revolution with Chinese characteristics and its success with its big joint logistics reform testbed."¹⁹

From the perspective of the long-term transformation of the PLA, the most interesting announcement at the Fourth Plenum was the promotion of the heads of the Air Force, Navy, and Second Artillery to CMC membership.²⁰ The move was presaged in an April 30, 2004, article in the PRC-owned Hong Kong newspaper *Wen wei po*.²¹ The decision to add to the CMC the three service branch commanders, who previously could only take part in enlarged CMC meetings, reflects the growing relative importance of these services in a Taiwan scenario and represents a major step forward in the PLA's efforts to become more "joint." According to Kevin Pollpeter, a leading expert on Chinese command-and-control theory, the PLA "recognizes that success in future military campaigns will require a command system that enables flexible, joint operations."²² The available biographies of these three new CMC members do not reveal much about their backgrounds or capabilities:

- Air Force Commander Qiao Qingchen was born in 1939 and is a native of Zhengzhou, Henan Province. He joined the PLA in 1956 and the CCP in 1960. He received the rank of Air Force major general in 1988 and was promoted to Air Force lieutenant general in 1996. He served as commander of an aviation division of the Air Force, deputy political commissar of the Fourth Army of the Air Force, and political commissar of the Xi'an command post of the Air Force. He was appointed deputy political commissar of the Air Force of the Jinan Military Region in 1990; deputy commander of the Beijing Military Region and concurrently commander of its Air Force in January 1996; deputy commander of the Air Force in November 1997; political commissar of the Air Force in January 1999; and commander of the Air Force in May 2002.
- Navy Commander Zhang Dingfa was born in 1943. He is a graduate of the submarine academy in Dalian. Zhang spent much of his career in various posts in the North Sea Fleet. He was appointed deputy Navy commander in 2000 and made president of the Academy of Military Sciences in 2002. Zhang was appointed commander of the Navy in 2003.²³
- Little is known about Second Artillery Commander Jing Zhiyuan. Before becoming chief of staff of the Second Artillery Corps, he was commander of the 52d Base of the Second Artillery Corps in Anhui's Huangshan area. His father, now retired, was a cadre at the Power Supply Bureau in Hubei's Xiangfan City. As he is not a princeling and his parents do not hold senior official posts, Jing Zhiyuan's promotion

to the post of commander of the Second Artillery Corps must be due not only to his young age but also to his competence.²⁴ He reportedly took part in the 1996 missile exercises involving Taiwan.²⁵

Analysis and Implications

These appointments are likely not personnel-driven, but institutional in nature. As a result, the party CMC is now composed of a mix of political leaders, military leadership, and institutional positions, including one civilian chairman (Hu Jintao), three vice chairmen (Guo Boxiong, Cao Gangchuan, Xu Caihou), the heads of the four general departments (Liang Guanglie, General Staff Department; Li Jinai, GPD; Liao Xilong, General Logistics Department; Chen Bingde, GAD), and the heads of the three services (Qiao Qingchen, PLA Air Force; Zhang Dingfa, PLA Navy; Jing Zhiyuan, Second Artillery). The shift to three vice chairmen is a puzzle, particularly given the prior pattern of promoting a rotating tier of two executive vice chairmen and two successor vice chairmen; it may be that the center is grooming Xu Caihou to take Cao Gangchuan's chief PLA politician role, or perhaps Cao is too busy negotiating weapons deals with the Russians to focus sufficient attention on pure political work, which was never his strong suit. Once Hu has had some time to savor the consolidation, we should also expect to see the successor politics game heat up again, one indicator of which will be the appointment of the designated successor as a civilian CMC vice chairman.

Notes

¹ <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20031/jm.html>.

² <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20033/jm.html>.

³ <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20034/jm.html>.

⁴ <http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/20031/jm.html>.

⁵ "China Publishes Jiang Zemin's Letter of Resignation," Xinhua News Agency, September 19, 2004.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cao Zhi, "Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao Attend Expanded Meeting of the Central Military Commission, Deliver Important Speeches," Xinhua News Agency, September 20, 2004.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "China Publishes Jiang Zemin's Letter."

¹⁶ Shi Wen, "Jiang Zemin Resigns from Post of Chairman of Central Military Commission, to 'Retire Completely' in March Next Year," *Zhongguo tongxun she*, December 29, 2004.

¹⁷ "The Decision of the Fourth Plenum of the 16th CPC Central Committee on Readjusting and Expanding the CPC Central Military Commission Membership," Xinhua News Agency, September 19, 2004.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Liu Yueh-shan, "Xu Caihou Takes Post of Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission," *Wen wei po*, September 20, 2004.

²⁰ “The Decision of the Fourth Plenum.”

²¹ “Commanders of Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery to Join Central Military Commission,” *Wen wei po*, April 30, 2004.

²² Personal communication with Kevin Pollpeter, January 31, 2005.

²³ Shi Jiangtao, “Hu Flexes His New Military Muscle,” Hong Kong *Sunday Morning Post*, September 26, 2004, 1.

²⁴ Yuan Le-yi, “Jing Zhiyuan Promoted to Commander of PLA Second Artillery Corps,” *Zhongguo shibao*, January 17, 2003, 11.

²⁵ Shi Jiangtao, “Hu Flexes His New Military Muscle.”