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China's Politics under Hu Jintao

Mathieu Duchâtel and François Godement

This special issue¹ focuses on Hu Jintao's first mandate in power, between the Sixteenth and the Seventeenth Party Congress (2002-2007). It considers two intertwined issues: power viewed through the lens of party politics, and actual policy changes that may have emanated from a mandate initially loaded with expectations. Besides the domestic dimensions of elite politics and ideological change, two central aspects of Chinese politics, the key question tackled in this issue is the ability of a new general secretary to transform past policies, especially in the realms of foreign affairs and national security since they are by tradition – and constitutionally – the responsibility of China's paramount leader.

Hu Jintao's hold on power and his political influence have been questioned more intensely than that of his predecessors. His first year in power was overshadowed by the lingering presence of Jiang Zemin, and by the continuing influence of power brokers such as Zeng Qinghong and the party elders. After Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao was the final leader to have been designated by Deng Xiaoping – much in advance – to be the next key member of the fourth generation of Chinese leaders. Although succession at the Sixteenth Congress was smoother than at any other time in the CCP's history, there were four indications of Hu Jintao's weak start as a leader. Jiang Zemin retained chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (CMC), leaving Hu Jintao in the position of vice chairman, whereas both Jiang and Deng had acquired the chairmanship very early on. Membership in the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) was expanded (from seven to nine members) in order to make room for Huang Ju and Jia Qinglin, two close associates of Jiang Zemin. Zeng

1 The articles published here are drawn from the Asia Centre's annual conference on contemporary Chinese politics held in June 2007 at Sciences Po, Paris: "Politics in the Hu Jintao Era: the CCP's Adaptation to Foreign and Domestic Challenges". The project was born in the aftermath of the Seventeenth Congress from an ambition to provide scholars and China experts with a renewed assessment of the Hu Jintao era, starting with two key issues: his strategies to overcome various challenges to CCP power and legitimacy, and the changes to the decision-making process within the State and the CCP introduced since 2002. Articles from that conference that are not published in this special issue can be consulted on the Asia Centre's website <www.centreasia.org>.

Qinghong, Jiang's lieutenant – and, accordingly, the succession candidate Jiang preferred – was included in the PBSC shortlist as Number Five, although he was previously only an alternate member of the Central Committee. Therefore, like Deng during his early years as leader, Hu may have lacked majority support in the Politburo. Last but not least, the Sixteenth Party Congress witnessed the inclusion of Jiang's ideological innovation, the “three represents”, in the CCP Constitution. This drew speculation that Jiang Zemin might attempt to follow the path opened previously by Deng Xiaoping – who retired at the Thirteenth Party Congress in 1987 from all formal positions except the chairmanship of the CMC, which he retained until March 1990 – and that Hu Jintao could possibly be confronted with the “Hua Guofeng” syndrome: being designated by the paramount leader of the party while being ousted from power by a charismatic leader with a stronger power base, as some expected would be Jiang Zemin's case when he was designated by Deng Xiaoping to be his successor in 1989. Even after Hu Jintao inherited the CMC chairmanship from Jiang Zemin in September 2004, strong limitations to his room for manoeuvre were noticeable (Miller 2005).

It was thus argued – in the aftermath of the Sixteenth Congress – that the extent of Hu's actual power was unclear (Ewing 2003) and that prospects for institutionalized succession had been overshadowed by factional politics (Fewsmith 2003a). Some ventured that Jiang Zemin had scored a “comprehensive” victory in limiting the power of the new general secretary and in ensuring that his political line would dominate China's development for the next couple of years (Fewsmith 2003b). However, the outcome of the Congress led to diverging interpretations, and Hu clearly set in motion a process-based hold on political power. Bo Zhiyue argues that the office of the CCP general secretary holds institutionally based power and that it can, therefore, govern beyond a factional balance of power because power lies in the institution and not in the man (Bo 2005). Moreover, a new pattern in the Chinese political system has emerged from the Sixteenth Congress, allowing Hu Jintao to govern through an evolving decision-making process. Bo Zhiyue has stressed the transformation of the leadership succession process from a “winner takes all” model to a “power balancing” pattern (Bo 2005). As increased complexity in terms of factional affiliation and policy priorities characterizes the composition of the PBSC, the legitimacy of the general secretary has progressively become based more on rational authority than charismatic authority. Therefore, a pattern of collective leadership has emerged

from the Congress, redefining the role of the general secretary as the most powerful arbitrator within the Politburo and its standing committee. Henceforth, we should see a more collective form of designating successors, unless, of course, the process should somehow revert back to one of factional struggle. The Sixteenth Party Congress witnessed the advent of new norms – the “retirement at 70 years of age” rule and the requirement that PBC members retire after two successive terms (Chu, Lo, and Myers 2004: 2). Under Hu Jintao, the CCP has consolidated this trend towards the institutionalization of processes. But it lacks institutions to deal with leadership change at the most senior level, and succession is still deemed to result from competition and jockeying between top leaders and factions within the CCP.

These trends were confirmed at the Seventeenth Party Congress, the occasion of a visible contest for Hu's future succession: Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang constitute “one successor too many”, raising the spectre of either another factional conflict or, at least, the suggestion that Hu is not in control of this succession, since Li Keqiang so clearly had Hu's imprint stamped on his career. Another apparent weakness of Hu's tenure has been the tandem that he forms with Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. Not only is the prime minister open to the criticism on issues of governance being raised in China but also his liberal background – dating back to the Zhao Ziyang era – has targeted him as a permanent suspect for party cadres who fear a potential revision of the verdict on Tiananmen. Time and again between 2002 and 2007, Wen Jiabao was described as being on the brink of a fall – either due to the inflation issue or on political grounds. And although these persistent rumours reported that Hu Jintao would imminently “dump” his lieutenant, it was clear that the net result of such an act would be a weakening of Hu Jintao himself.

Yet Hu, and the Hu–Wen tandem, have held onto power throughout the period. The reasons for this are examined in the papers of this special edition. The transition of power at the Sixteenth Party Congress (November 8–15, 2002) may not have been complete, but after just a year Hu had achieved consolidation, formally retiring Jiang Zemin from the CMC within two years while concomitantly weakening or co-opting rival leaders. Throughout trying times – which included a period of runaway hyper-growth followed by a voluntary cooling-off of China's economy, a subsequent and withering world crisis, and then a most audacious policy for kick-starting China's economy – there has been evidence that the Hu–Wen tandem has been very much in charge.

Hu has thus achieved power more quickly than was generally forecast, but at the expense of content over process. Deng, himself, had to struggle continuously between 1977 and 1984 to achieve full control of the Politburo. It is indeed remarkable that he achieved this control only as he was about to “retire” formally from the daily management of state affairs. But on the way to power, he had pushed several epochal reforms. Hu’s insistence on rules and collective leadership has been an effective vehicle to complete the power transition – as the case of his control over the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) illustrates (Ma 2009) – but it may also have constrained his veritable freedom of action.

Indeed, there has been much ambiguity about the nature of Hu’s power, and therefore his purported achievements. Hu Jintao’s background – from his stint with the Communist Youth League, to his nomination as an administrator in Gansu during the heyday of Maoism, to his plea for balanced growth between the coast and the interior in order to achieve more equality – suggests both a born-again Communist and a reformer. Yet, his entire practice of power suggests a process-based strategy, with caution at the heart of his actions. Time and again observers have believed, especially on the eve of party congresses or annual National Assembly meetings, that China was about to plunge forward into a new stage of liberalization. This has not happened under Hu, who has, instead, often tightened the screws on the expression of political or social criticism. His true innovation lies in the careful implementation of collective Party rules, from the recording and official summary of top-level party meetings to a seamless process of intra-party selection and election.

The papers in this issue detail, in part, this process of consolidation. More importantly, they address the question of how a new political balance within the system has been achieved, through which political processes and with which actors. Our authors then turn to the most difficult question of all: What kind of change has been procured by this new political tenure? Have the changes in process been matched by changes in the nature of the political system, and in policies on key issues? This issue of JCCA focuses on foreign affairs and national security because they are key responsibilities of China’s paramount leader. The March 2004 amendment to the PRC constitution institutionalized past practices, stating that the president of the PRC conducts “state affairs”. The three leading small groups on national security, foreign affairs, and Taiwan – China’s chief institutions for decision-making on related matters – have

been led by General Secretary Hu Jintao since 2003, and he has remained at the helm since the Seventeenth Party Congress (Miller 2008). Therefore, they prove to be particularly valuable as case studies in assessing the ability of the general secretary to undertake policy change.

The five papers in this issue examine the following topics: elite politics and the evolution of the political system (Cheng Li), ideological reform (Heike Holbig), foreign and security policy-making processes (Jean-Pierre Cabestan), policy towards Taiwan (Wu-ueh Chang and Chien-min Chao), and climate and energy security (Karl Hallding, Guoyi Han, and Marie Olsson).

Cheng Li examines the social background of the fifth generation of Chinese leaders, which was promoted at the CCP's Seventeenth Congress. This fifth generation of political elites is marked by a growing diversity of social backgrounds. The era of the supremacy of engineers over China's political system appears to be finished. Cheng Li identifies three distinctive groups in terms of past professional careers: lawyers, entrepreneurs and "returnees" from foreign universities (*haiguipai*). In contrast to the fourth generation, whose core was selected by Deng Xiaoping himself, political trajectories (of the fifth generation) have taken increasingly divergent paths and factional links have become a decisive factor. As elite recruitment evolves, the leadership's control over a broader, socially based CCP needs adaptation, as do the traditional rules of the game for decision-making and power-sharing between different groups. Cheng Li identifies a pattern of emerging bipartisanship within the CCP, between an elitist coalition led by former general secretary Jiang Zemin, former vice president Zeng Qinghong and the incumbent chairman of the National People's Congress, Wu Bangguo, and a populist coalition led by General Secretary Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. These two coalitions have political bases predicated on factional affiliations. Elitists are mainly princelings, while populists rely on the *tuanpai*, the Communist Youth League. Most importantly, they have diverging political priorities: further integration into the world economy, development of the private sector and market liberalization for the former group; more balanced regional development, health care and employment for the latter. Coalitions, factions and their policy priorities are embodied in the two main figures of the fifth generation, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, who, normally, should succeed Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao at the Eighteenth Party Congress, slated for 2012. This analysis underlines the limitations of the general secretary's power. But Cheng Li argues that

this emerging pattern of bipartisanship is already having an impact on the decision-making process. The distribution of power between the two coalitions works as a non-institutionalized system of checks and balances. On the policy front, it raises new challenges for the CCP's performance because of increased bargaining and the risk of deadlock. On the political front, it brings a transformation which is leading to collective leadership and some form of Chinese-style inner-party democracy.

Heike Holbig analyses the CCP's ideological reform in the aftermath of the Sixteenth Party Congress. From Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, the re-emphasis on ideology and the inclusion of the concepts of Harmonious Socialist Society and of a Scientific Outlook on Development in the party constitution at the Seventeenth Party Congress have been tremendously significant. Moreover, after Hu Jintao was elected general secretary, the elitist concept of the Three Represents was reinterpreted in a populist manner by shifting the emphasis to representation of the interests of the people from that of the "advanced social productive forces". Holbig argues that the re-emphasis of party ideology under Hu targets the perceived fragility of performance-based legitimacy. Party and academic elites have repeatedly emphasized the legitimizing function of ideology and the adaptation of Marxism to the needs of a society experiencing tremendous transformation since the beginning of the reform era. That Hu Jintao managed to enshrine the ideological innovations of his team in the CCP's constitution only five years after having been elected general secretary is a formidable achievement, revealing not only the sense of urgency within certain segments of the top leadership regarding ideological reform but also the extent of Hu Jintao's power. This contrasts with the length of time taken and the difficulties experienced by Jiang Zemin in building his own ideological legacy.

In his study of the foreign and security policy decision-making processes under Hu Jintao, Jean-Pierre Cabestan finds that they were not transformed in the aftermath of the 2002 power transition. On the whole, since the era of reform, policy-making in China has experienced gradual change. It took two years for Hu Jintao to gain control over the key institutions of foreign and security policy: the three small leading groups and the CMC. Cabestan argues that the general secretary enjoys pre-eminence over most key decisions in the realm of foreign and security policy. Moreover, he is the only link between the party and the army at the decision-making level. The Politburo does not meet frequently enough to be influential, and although the members of its stand-

ing committee define, collectively, the broad directions of foreign and security policy, and arguably play a key role when arbitration is needed, these policies are made by the leading small groups. Although Hu Jintao needs to grant greater benefits to the PLA in order to secure its loyalty, on the whole, the role of the military in foreign and security policy-making has decreased and the CMC no longer functions as a “National Security Council”. While it is true that decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of the general secretary, there continue to be problems in terms of the integration of foreign and security policy. This can be explained by the multiplicity of institutions and actors involved in the foreign affairs of China: local governments, foreign propaganda organs, the International Liaison Department of the CCP, the Ministry of Commerce, and private actors. Moreover, despite Hu Jintao’s intention of establishing a National Security Council integrating foreign and defence policies, he has been unable to achieve that goal.

In contrast, Chien-min Chao and Wu-ueh Chang argue that Hu Jintao has changed the PRC’s policy towards Taiwan to such an extent that cross-Strait relations have been radically transformed. Taiwan policy is a crucial responsibility for any Chinese paramount leader; it is a matter of legitimacy and legacy, engaging national security, sovereignty, and the definition of China as a nation and a territorial entity. Chao and Chang argue that Hu Jintao has been the most pragmatic Chinese leader in handling the Taiwan issue. They demonstrate the personal involvement of Hu Jintao in Taiwan affairs through the Central Leading Small Group. Hu has personally taken charge of communications with the KMT and has pushed for increased transparency and professionalism at the Taiwan Affairs Office. He has opened the way for a deep reshuffling of ARATS, the body responsible for “officially non-official” talks with Taiwan. But the most significant change has concerned the redefinition of the “One China” principle. Beijing has agreed to open channels of communication with Taipei on the basis of their mutual recognition of the 1992 consensus and to retreat from its past insistence on forcing Taipei to accept the PRC’s version of the “One-China” principle. On the whole, Hu Jintao has insisted on the soft elements of China’s Taiwan policy and has accepted some degree of compromise on issues the Taiwanese population cares about most, such as international space and purchasing power. One of the key elements of this new Taiwan policy has been to grant direct economic advantages to the Taiwanese population. Moreover, Hu Jintao has accepted an increased and direct involvement by Chinese officials in

bilateral talks, rendering these talks official in everything but name. These changes, coupled with the relative break with Jiang Zemin's policy towards Taiwan, have contributed to creating a basis for mutual trust between the CCP and the KMT. However, Chao and Chang warn that the differences of political systems and Taiwan's sense of identity may limit the ability of the two sides to deal with more sophisticated political issues.

The last paper tackles a non-traditional security issue: the way China deals with climate change and energy security. Karl Hallding, Guoyi Han, and Marie Olsson identify these issues as a new political focus of China's leadership under Hu Jintao. China started, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, to put in place a set of policies to deal with climate change and energy efficiency, and has engaged in 2006 in the building of a framework to address climate security. As China's leadership is ambitious and aware of the urgency of the issue, it is stuck between the need to master a low-carbon development path and the reality of the rapid industrialization and urbanization of China. Hallding, Han, and Olsson argue that the ideological innovations of the Hu–Wen leadership have helped to promote a new stance on environmental issues. In that case, there is an obvious link between ideology and policy change.

The papers collected here offer a new assessment of elite politics, ideological reform and national security policies after the Sixteenth Party Congress. The ambition of the Asia Centre's 2008 conference in Paris was to identify the interactions between party politics, policy change, and decision-making processes in the aftermath of an unprecedented political succession in China. The trends highlighted here – balance of power within the CCP as a basis for some degree of inner-party democracy; ideological reform as a key legitimizing tool; the relative transformation of foreign and security policies, in terms of content rather than process; the increased institutionalization of policy-making – paint a mixed picture of the evolution of China's politics under Hu Jintao. The aftermath of the Eighteenth Party Congress will be a defining moment in which to evaluate their durability, as well as the legacy of Hu Jintao.

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