

Who is the Paramount Leader of China?

Written by Robert Potter

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ROBERT POTTER, DEC 28 2012

One of the claimed success stories of the Chinese Communist Party in the Post-Tiananmen era is that they have developed a norms based answer to the problem of generational change. Prof. Andrew Nathan has argued that China's enduring authoritarianism has coopted a solution to the problem of succession by developing an approach to generational change that allows new leaders to enter and old ones to retire.

Now as we witness the change in leadership to the new generation, led ostensibly by Xi Jinping, a great deal of new evidence is rapidly emerging which we can use to develop our understanding further. We can say with a fair degree of certainty that the 'norms' were strong enough to render the question of Hu Jintao staying in the role of the President past 2012 moot. Indeed, the succession to the new leadership will inevitably occur and Xi Jinping will be President, thus a new generation of Chinese leaders will inherit the positions of their predecessors. This new team, will be the ones holding on to the levers of power that will be used to solve China's problems in the future.

However, is there anything we can add to this analysis that will allow us to develop a deeper understanding of the process? What evidence is there that shows these 'norms' are being strengthened and/or weakened?

The first piece of evidence worth looking at is the offices that Xi Jinping will inherit upon his ascension to the Presidency. When Jiang Zemin handed over power to Hu Jintao he held onto the control of the Party Commission that oversaw the military for a time. As President Hu now hands over power to Xi Jinping, the control over the military will be passed over concurrently. As a result, it appears that at least structurally the process of handing over to the new President has become more of a line and less of a process.

However, as interesting as this narrative is, there is an alternate narrative at work behind the scenes that could also account for this shift. There is evidence that run counter to our accepting this as a total explanation for what is occurring inside the Chinese leadership during the transition. The role of Jiang Zemin in the process so far has emerged as an interesting factor that needs an explanation. What was starkly missing from the new lineup of the Politburo was the large number of men handpicked by President Hu, who emerged through a patronage network he developed as a result of his long time in office. Instead, the power broker who seems to have had the lion's share of the influence was Hu's predecessor, Jiang Zemin.

The reduction in the size of the Politburo Standing Committee certainly stands as evidence that they want the organization to be more decisive, as its reduction from nine members to seven certainly seems to be designed to foster greater consensus. However the former President Jiang Zemin seems to have had a large degree of say in selecting the new members who will comprise the new Standing Committee and 18th Politburo. Of the seven people appointed to the new Standing Committee, five or six are believed to belong to the patronage network led by Jiang Zemin. This is compared to the one or two members who are believed to have been supported by President Hu's network within the Communist Youth League.

When compared to the previous handover this seems to show a surprising amount of influence in the hands of President Zemin. Hu Jintao was supported into his position through the patronage of President Zemin's predecessor Deng Xiaoping. President Zemin, however, managed to hold onto the control of the military after his term and now seems to dominate patronage network that is appointing the new administration. This stands in opposition to the

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standard view, assumed before the 18th National Congress, that President Hu would be in a stronger position than President Zemin to appoint the new Standing Committee. This evidently turned out not to be the case.

This raises the question of just how influential President Hu had been throughout his time in office. If the norms were more powerful than they seem to be presently, how would the role of President Zemin be interpreted? The norms did allow for a large degree of changeover within the senior leadership. If the norms are to be seen as a pure function of facilitating a changeover of the personnel then they ought to be considered successful. The routing of the supporters of President Hu from the new government seems to show that the Communist Party is capable of engaging in large amounts of contentious leadership change without overriding the norms that exist. This framework will, as Prof. Nathan has argued, dampen the level of infighting which traditionally seems to bring down authoritarian governments. That said, the fact that President Zemin is exerting a large amount of influence on the new government opens the question of who is the true paramount leader of China. The danger of this situation is that while China seems to be developing new leaders, its old ones do not seem to be retiring.

The evidence towards a conclusion to this situation is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, President Xi had more power going into office than President Hu did, but that being said, is Xi the paramount leader? If he is not, who is and if he is not will he be? Does the collection of previous Presidents stand as an obstacle or an enabling factor in President Xi consolidating power. Are these norms strong enough to allow the effective transfer of power between generations of leadership? Although the development of these norms has obviously impacted the change in generations how decisive have they been in ending the traditional role of power brokers behind the scenes in the People Republic in exercising paramount control. As this new government takes shape, looking for evidence that shows us the direction China is taking, the role the norms are likely to play will allow us to draw conclusions about just how stable China is for the future.

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Robert Potter is a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University. He is presently studying how security theory can be applied to the changing Asia-Pacific security environment.