

Leadership Analysis in an Era of Institutionalized Party Politics

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Many analysts of Chinese leadership politics agree that a process of institutionalization has been under way in Chinese politics since the late 1970s. The question is: how does the advance of institutionalization in leadership politics affect the effort by analysts outside the political order to answer the perennial questions of analytical interest? These are the questions of who wins and who loses, what is the relationship between policy and power, and what should we expect ahead. In words sometimes attributed to Lenin himself, “??? ?????”

Creeping Institutionalization

The priority attached to institutionalization of politics was apparent from the very beginning of the reform era under Deng Xiaoping. The communiqué of the 1978 Third Plenum resurrected language originally incorporated into the political report delivered by Liu Shaoqi at the 1956 Eighth CCP Congress that called for an end to the spontaneous, campaign-driven politics of the revolutionary and socialist transformation periods in favor of institutional processes regulated by party discipline and codes of socialist law. It also relegated to secondary significance waging “class struggle” which had been the foremost task of the CCP under Mao Zedong’s leadership after 1957 and which had justified the chaotic politics that he promoted during the Cultural Revolution.

Concrete steps to restore orderly and institutionalized processes in Chinese politics emerged immediately after the Third Plenum and have continued down to the present. In the Deng Xiaoping era, these steps included the following:

- *Restoration of regularized institutional routines*, reflected in the convocation of national party congresses, Central Committee plenums, National People’s

Congress sessions, and other meetings according to the schedule mandated by the CCP and PRC constitutions, in contrast to the breakdown of such processes under Mao after 1959.

- *Resurrection of organizational authority and discipline*, reflected in the creation of the party discipline inspection commission system in 1979, the adoption and revision of codes of party discipline in 1980 and after, and the resumption of the effort to set down codes of law suspended in the late 1950s.
- *Provision for orderly succession*, reflected in the creation of the Central Advisory Commission (formalizing the effort to set down “first” and “second lines” in the leadership begun in 1956 but disrupted thereafter), institution of term limits for high-level posts in the state hierarchy, injunctions against “lifetime tenure” for leaders in CCP posts, and stipulations for mandatory retirement ages in the PLA and elsewhere.

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In the late Deng and post-Deng years, the institutionalization of leadership processes has continued:

- *Processes of leadership succession* have clarified. Since the 1997 Fifteenth CCP Congress, an informal norm has appeared to be in place by which Politburo leaders passing the age of 70 are expected to retire at the next party congress. Hu Jintao’s succession as party general secretary, PRC president, and Military Commission chairman followed a ten-year period of methodical preparation, a process evidently set down originally by Deng Xiaoping but which proceeded even after Deng himself passed from the scene. The pattern has generated expectations for a similarly deliberate process of preparation of a designated successor to Hu himself, which may become visible at the Seventeenth CCP Congress slated for 2007.
- *Selection for membership on the Politburo and CMC* appears to have settled into a pattern of functional representation of key posts, rather than according to some balance of factional cronies as was apparent in the past. A comparable pattern of representation is visible in the membership of party committees at the province level.

Complementary Trends

The incremental progress of institutionalization in leadership politics has coincided with a gradual transformation of the dynamic of leadership politics over the same period. An attempt to assess the impact of institutionalization on leadership politics will have to take into account several shifts that have emerged over the past decade and a half:

- *The authority of the paramount leader* has appeared to shrink over time. Mao's authority derived from his role in guiding the communist revolution to power and from his base in the PLA. He appeared invulnerable to direct challenge, although, as Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and others tried in the early 1960s, his actual power could be indirectly circumscribed. Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s also appeared to hold a supreme position in leadership decision-making, although senior leaders—such as Chen Yun—whose credentials rivaled his own in many respects could blunt his power. Deng's lieutenants in top positions—like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang—could come and go, but not even the 1989 Tiananmen crisis appears to have warranted attempts to remove Deng himself. It is not clear that Jiang Zemin attained the level of authority Deng held, much less Mao, and it is even less clear that Hu Jintao has done so since Jiang's retirement.
- *The authority of the elders* also appears to be shrinking. Deng's efforts in the early 1980s to get the senior leaders in his reform coalition to retire to the Central Advisory Commission—less successfully at the 1982 Twelfth CCP Congress but more so at the 1985 party conference and the 1987 Thirteenth CCP Congress—created a politically powerful class of geezers comparable to the “old Bolsheviks” in the USSR. They were veteran revolutionaries who had helped found the CCP, survived the Long March, fought the Japanese and the civil war against Chiang Kai-shek, founded the institutions of the PRC, in many cases endured the Cultural Revolution decade, and worked with Deng to launch the reforms after Mao's death. By virtue of this experience and stature, they held great power in ongoing politics despite their retirement. By 1995, most of these veterans had died off. The

retirement of senior leaders since the 1992 Fourteenth CCP Congress supplemented the original ranks of retired elders, but the new crop of elders have been leaders whose careers advanced to the top in the PRC's post-revolutionary era following Mao's death. They may retain power through their networks of relationships established over their careers, but they do not appear to have the prominence the group who retired in the 1980s did. This appears even more the case with the crop who retired in 2002 at the Sixteenth CCP Congress. Their public profile is vastly reduced from that of the elders who retired in the 1980s, and we hear very little of their efforts to intervene in the ongoing politics of the current top leadership. Jiang Zemin has yet to undertake anything resembling Deng Xiaoping's talks during his tour of Shanghai and Guangdong in January-February 1992 (although perhaps we should watch for something like this heading into the 2007 party congress). We no longer hear (probably false) stories about retired PLA generals writing letters to the Central Committee to intervene in Taiwan policy, as we did in the early 1990s. This leaves the impression that the current class of elders just ain't got the political whack the veteran revolutionaries did after retiring in the 1980s.

- *The current leadership continuum appears to lack a central fulcrum.* For decades, Mao, Deng, and Jiang sustained their power in part by playing to the center. By having leadership factions both to the left and to the right, the paramount leaders could lean in the opposite direction whenever his power seemed vulnerable to challenge from either side. In the 1967-76 period, Mao seemed to benefit from having a factional balance divided among the Cultural Revolution left (Jiang Qing et al.), the PLA leadership around Lin Biao, and the State Council moderates around Zhou Enlai. After the 1971 Lin Biao affairs, he tilted first to Zhou's side until 1973, when he appears to have tilted back toward what he later called the "gang of four." In the Deng period, Deng appeared to balance between leaders on the right who favored a larger scope and faster pace of reforms and those on the left who wanted to move slowly and cautiously. In the 1990s, Jiang appeared to profit politically by having the apparently liberal Qiao Shi (and after 1997 Zhu Rongji) on one side and Li Peng on the other. Thus far, Hu Jintao does not appear

to have carved out such a middle ground position. He appears invested in a range of “people-centered” policies that are not uniquely identified with him and that seem to contrast with Jiang’s evident support for the coastal regions over the interior (despite the fact that the western development strategy began under his watch). It is not yet altogether clear, in fact, where the fault lines are in the current leadership.

Taken together, these factors suggest that the dynamic of leadership politics under Hu Jintao has evolved significantly far from patterns in the Deng era, not to mention from those in the later Mao period.

The Problem of Sources

China-watching in the good old days largely involved interpretation of a limited corpus of sources. The output of PRC media themselves¹ supplied the base of information from which most analysts worked, sometimes supplemented by refugee interviews in Hong Kong, polemics in the Cultural Revolution wallposters and Red Guard press, and not much else. After the normalization of U.S.-PRC relations in 1979 and with the liberalized publication constraints of the reform era, sources on many aspects of Chinese politics and society became available. A broad memoir and authorized historical literature on aspects of leadership politics in earlier periods has helped illuminate mysteries of long standing. PRC newspapers and journals these days also carry contending views of mid-level experts and authors on topics previously regarded as too sensitive to be aired in public, such as international affairs and military trends.

But despite an incremental effort at transparency under Hu Jintao, it is remarkable how little light our expanded range and variety of sources has shed on ongoing leadership decision-making and politics. Arguably, we know even less about ongoing leadership

¹ Yes, comrades, I stand firm and increasingly alone at the barricades, insisting that “media” is a plural noun.

debates than we did in the good old days in the 1960s and 1970s, when PRC media reported contending leaders presenting baldly competing views at the same leadership conference. Many examples come to mind, including the 1975 Dazhai conference on agriculture, at which both Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Qing touted clashing views; the 1978 debate on “taking practice as the sole criterion for testing truth,” the launching of which featured the party’s top-ranking leader Hua Guofeng and its third-ranking leader Deng Xiaoping taking diametrically opposed positions on the sensitive question of the CCP’s guiding ideology; and the 1988 policy debate on wage and price reform, in which Zhao Ziyang—backed by Deng Xiaoping--was defeated by a coalition of conservative reform leaders, including Chen Yun, Li Peng, Li Xiannian, and Yao Yilin, who argued in favor of inflation controls over price reform.

Many analysts now have routine access to counterparts among mid-level officials and experts in Beijing, but it is not clear that they know much at all about the concrete day-to-day politics among the top leaders. They may tell us stories and pass on insights, but there is no more reason to credit their accounts than the stories and insights that mid-level American officials and (gasp!) academics circulate about politics in the White House. In the current information vacuum, as in the 1980s, the Beijing rumor mill churns away, producing often fanciful speculations and vivid but probably misleading and false accounts of policy brawls in the Politburo, all duly reported in the Western and non-communist Hong Kong press.

Why I Know Less Today Than I Did Before

The upshot of all of the trends and circumstances sketched above is that the creeping institutionalization of Chinese leadership politics has made analyzing Chinese politics both easier and more difficult. On one hand, the regularization of party and state processes has made politics more predictable. The schedule of major leadership meetings through the course of a year has established expectations for an NPC session in the spring, a Central Committee plenum in the fall, and so forth. Unusual delay of expected meetings (or their failure to convene at all) invites credible speculation that leadership

differences have held things up. In addition, the drafting of reports for presentation at party congresses and NPC sessions, of decisions to be adopted by Central Committee plenums, and of budgets for review at annual NPC sessions produces streams of relevant commentary in the press that aids prediction of what may eventually emerge and the means to assess the significance of the final outcome based on the preceding debate.

At the same time, the imposition of institutionalized processes, complemented by the higher premium in the post-1989 period on public displays of leadership unanimity, means that leadership competition and conflict have become embedded and submerged within the framework of institutions and their associated schedules and routines. This has meant that they are less visible and harder to dissect. Many major events in leadership politics seem frustratingly explicable in terms of alternative realities. To cite two examples:

- *Membership in the present Politburo Standing Committee.* The 16th Central Committee's First Plenum in November 2002 appointed a nine-member Standing Committee. Many analysts concluded, not altogether unreasonably, that Jiang Zemin had packed the Standing Committee with cronies loyal to him, in opposition to Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, and Li Peng's purported crony Luo Gan. However, composition of this nine-member Standing Committee also reflected, with one exception, the wholesale promotion of all members of the 15th Central Committee Politburo who did not retire because of age. In addition, no regular member of the new Politburo had served on it previously. In effect, the process in 2002 made it appear as a deliberate step toward making regular membership on the Politburo a preparatory step toward eventual promotion onto the Standing Committee, the real core of decision-making power. So: did the process reflect a grab for sustained power after retirement by Jiang Zemin, or was it a step toward a new process of institutionalized Politburo turnover?
- *Hu Jintao's incremental succession to Jiang Zemin.* The slow retreat of Jiang Zemin from his top positions—yielding his post as party general secretary to Hu at the Sixteenth CCP Congress in 2002, his post as PRC president at the Tenth NPC

in 2003, his post as chairman of the party CMC in 2004, and his post as PRC CMC chairman at the 2005 NPC session—has widely been interpreted as reflecting Jiang's struggle to hold onto his positions as long as possible and to maximize his power after formal retirement. At the same time, however, Jiang's staged withdrawal matched the precedent set by Deng Xiaoping's incremental retirement from his posts in the 1987-1990 period. In that case, the pattern of Jiang's retirement may have been set going into the 2002 party congress as a consequence of institutionalized succession.

I take it as a matter of theological certainty that leadership politics is about power and the struggle to attain and sustain it. With interpretive dilemmas such as these, however, it is not clear whether and how the longstanding frameworks for analyzing leadership politics still apply. Within the sturdier lattice of institutions that has emerged over the past two decades, the struggle for power is less visible and must inevitably be shaped by the advancing progress of institutionalization itself. Mao-in-command or Deng-in-command frameworks? It is hard to see how this approach well describes Jiang Zemin's or Hu Jintao's circumstances. Frameworks based on presumed ideological convictions or visions of the national interest as the foundation of competition (what Harry Harding once described as "tendency" analysis)? Perhaps, but the differences in leadership outlook are much harder to discern. Patron-client factionalism, in which leadership factions composed of personal networks around Mafia-like chieftains advocate policy based on considerations of personal power? Undoubtedly, something like this goes on, but if so, it operates differently than in the good old days. Bureaucratic coalitions and cliques, based on the logic of "where you stand depends on where you sit"? The progress toward functional representation on decision-making bodies such as the Politburo and CMC might suggest that this framework is more relevant than ever before. But, again, it is not at all clear that the top leadership operates this way.

For all these reasons, I cannot escape the feeling that, after 31 years of following Chinese leadership politics on a day-to-day basis, I know a lot less about how leadership politics works than I used to.