

## Jiang's Last Move: Leadership Transition in China

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Leadership transition in China, which usually takes place within the state headquarters *Zhongnanhai*, or at the summer resort *Beidaihe*, if not inside even smaller “black box,” is less predictable than that in liberal democracies. The country’s paramount leader Jiang Zemin is expected to resign from at least some of his key posts following the 16<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). There is almost no doubt that Jiang will give the presidency of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to his designated successor Vice President Hu Jintao, given the constitutionally stipulated term limit of the presidency and Hu’s current position. However, it is unclear whether Jiang will resign from his posts as general secretary of the CCP and chairman of the Party’s Central Military Commission (CMC), since no written rules about the term limit of these two positions have ever existed. In the absence of political transparency and institutionalization, ordinary people living in China can talk only covertly about the upcoming leadership transition, contrary to the fevered speculations among China watchers outside the mainland over the past year or so. Because of Jiang’s core position among Party leaders, discussion of China’s leadership transition has inevitably focused on whether Jiang will retire from his current positions, with two principal scenarios dominating the speculations.

### Will Jiang Retire?—Two Scenarios Revisited

One popular prediction of Jiang’s future role in Chinese politics is the “non-retirement” scenario. Under such a scenario, General Secretary Jiang, while maintaining his military headship, would also continue to serve as Party boss, either retaining his current title, or resurrecting and assuming the post of the Party chairmanship while yielding the devalued general secretaryship to Hu. In such a situation, the other three top leaders of the third generation, Li Peng, Zhu Rongji and Li Ruihuan, could retain their high ranks within the Standing Committee of the Politburo. They might even become PRC president, National People’s Congress (NPC) chairman, and State Council premier, respectively, while keeping Hu in the wings for another five years.

Proponents of the “non-retirement” scenario point to unverified reports that senior Party and military officials have requested Jiang to stay in office. The “non-retirement” scenario is further supported by the disappearance of the term “fourth generation of leaders” from Chinese media or official speeches since the beginning of this year. It is reasoned that China’s top leaders and senior officials are uneasy at the leadership transition from the third to fourth generation, fearing political instability or the loss of their own privileges. The ascendant ideological campaign for preaching the “three represents” idea is also interpreted as Jiang’s attempt to retain his Party leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Another popular perception of Jiang’s future is the “half-retirement” scenario, predicting that Jiang will cling to his military leadership while giving up other Party positions. It is argued that Jiang could easily follow the precedent of Deng Xiaoping, who resigned from the Politburo in 1987 but continued to serve as CMC chairman until 1989. Even if Jiang gives the CMC

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<sup>2</sup> The “three-represents” idea means that the CCP should “always represent the development requirements of advanced forces of production; the marching direction of advanced Chinese culture; and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.”

chairmanship to Hu, observers note that he could remain *de facto* military chief, just as the late Deng did between 1989 and 1994.<sup>3</sup>

Those who espouse various versions of the “half-retirement” scenario assume that military leadership is the core of political power in China, and that it is most difficult to transfer military power from one leader to another. They also perceive China’s military power structure as a unique kingdom independent from civil institutions and norms, operated strictly by the rules of discipline, hierarchy, seniority, war experience and long-time personal ties. Since Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, Jiang’s two predecessors, failed to capture the CMC chairmanship, and since Jiang himself took over five years to become a real military chief, it is unlikely that Hu, who assumed the CMC vice chairmanship less than three years ago, would be able to take over military power from Jiang overnight. Those who espouse this scenario are keen to observe that several key military figures have shown their unambiguous support for the Party leadership surrounding Jiang, in active response to Jiang’s call for political unity and stability (*jiang daju, jiang tuanjie, jiang wending*) in his May 31, 2002 speech delivered at the Central Party School.

This essay argues, however, that Jiang is more likely to transfer all his current posts to Hu than he is to retain only some of them. Regardless of Jiang’s personal willingness (or, rather, the intention of his loyal followers) to resign or not, he is constrained by institutional rules (formal and informal) and unwritten norms developed in the 1990s. This does not mean that Jiang will completely lose his political influence following the 16<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress. For one thing, Jiang’s idea of the “three represents” will be enshrined in the Party constitution by the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress, serving as a new ideological guideline for the Party as well as the country. Moreover, Jiang may find a new institutional base for himself, which will serve to dilute Hu’s authority and ensure a gradual transfer of power over a number of years. One possible option for Jiang is to empower the National Party Congress by upgrading it from an “electoral college” and a rubber stamp for endorsing the Party constitution revision into an ultimate decision-making body.

In the following discussion, this essay will employ the new institutional approach, seeing power succession as a result of interactions between self-interests and institutional constraints, while emphasizing the political elite’s adaptability to the existing institutional arrangements and its ability to renovate or create new institutions to reach certain goals. The methodology to be adopted is historical and analytical.

### **Institutional Constraints—Significance of Informal Rules and Unwritten Norms**

Although no specific regulation on the term limit of Party general secretary and CMC chairman has been written into the Party constitution, informal rules may be at work. As the positions of PRC president, State Council premier and NPC chairman are all subject to a two-term limit constitutionally, the Party probably has an informal rule or unwritten norm about the term limit of its top posts. In fact, since the end of the Cultural Revolution, no Party leader or military head has ever stayed in his office after two full terms.<sup>4</sup> Jiang would not be likely to break this precedent and undermine Beijing’s previous efforts to abolish the lifetime term of office for Party leaders. Breaking the precedent would also damage Jiang’s image as a reformer in PRC history, not to mentioning provoke a possible reaction within the Party.

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<sup>3</sup> Deng resigned from his post as CMC chairman in fall 1989, together with his membership on the Central Committee of the CCP. However, Deng remained influential in military as well as national affairs in the early 1990s. Deng did not die until 1997, but he uncharacteristically failed to appear on Chinese TV during the Spring Festival of 1995, a significant sign of his fading from the Chinese political stage.

<sup>4</sup> After Mao, Hua Guofeng served as chairman for the Party and the CMC between 1976 and 1981. Deng served as CMC chairman from 1981 to 1989. Hu Yaobang first worked as Party chairman from 1981 to 1982, then as Party general secretary from 1982 to 1987. Zhao Ziyang failed to finish his term as general secretary. Jiang took these two positions from Zhao and Deng in 1989, and his two full terms are supposed to end with the 16<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress.

Another institutional constraint on Jiang's ambition comes from an informal age limit for Party and government officials. While this rule is more strictly practiced at the provincial/ministerial level than the higher level, the retirement of Qiao Shi from the Standing Committee of the Party's Politburo and the chairmanship of the NPC in his seventies following the 15<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress in 1997 has set a precedent for Jiang to follow. In fact, strict adherence to this rule on the age for retirement (70) would have required Jiang to resign from his posts too following the same Congress five years ago. At the age of 76, if Jiang wants to continue as an exception, he is likely to confront strong opposition within the Party and encourage other veterans to follow his example and remain on the Politburo's Standing Committee—thereby creating new tension between the third and fourth generation leaders.

Moreover, if Jiang retains his general secretaryship and CMC chairmanship while giving up the presidency, the new president would have to adjust his role in state affairs and redefine his relations with the general secretary as well as with the premier. Institutionally, the PRC presidency has been greatly empowered since 1993 by the present arrangement, in which Jiang occupies a trinity of positions and thereby serves as “core leader.” Around him, the other two top leaders, Li Peng and Qiao Shi, also concurrently served as premier and NPC chairman in 1993, respectively. This 1993 institutional innovation—or, to be more precise, restoration of early practice in PRC history—has been conceptualized as “anchoring Party leadership to the government”(yu dang yu zheng, or jiangdang yu zheng).<sup>5</sup> The 9<sup>th</sup> NPC followed this unwritten norm, with Jiang retaining the presidency, Li obtaining the NPC chairmanship, and Zhu Rongji taking the premiership.

Retrospectively, “anchoring Party leadership to the government” is consistent with the Party's tradition and ruling principle. After establishment of the PRC, Party Chairman Mao Zedong concurrently served as the state head from 1949 to 1959. Party Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi served as NPC chairman between 1954 and 1959, and Zhou Enlai, another vice chairman of the Party, retained the premiership of the State Council until he died in 1976. One of the most dramatic institutional changes in the history of the PRC was the abolition of the state presidency during the Cultural Revolution, a period when government offices were overwhelmingly replaced by “revolutionary committees” or “Party core groups” (*dang de hexin xiaozu*) in the name of enhancing the Party's unitary leadership (*yi yuan hua ling dao*). Consequently, the premiership became the most influential of government positions. Since 1993, however, the state presidency has resumed its supreme status over the premiership within the government.

“Separating the Party from the government” (*dang zheng fen kai*) was once an important norm, but it has been rarely mentioned since 1990. Practice of this norm can be traced to 1959 when Mao gave the PRC presidency to Liu Shaoqi and maintained Party and CMC chairmanships himself. With this arrangement, Mao remained the paramount leader on the “second front,” while Liu, as the Party's number two leader, took care of day-to-day state affairs on the “first front”—an institutional design and precedent that probably inspired Deng's reform blueprint of Party-government separation proposed in the 1980s. However, the uneasy relationship between Mao and Liu ended up with Liu's dismissal as president during the Cultural Revolution. Because of the institutional tension between Party chairman and PRC president, as well as Mao's inability to serve as state head for more than two terms, the abolition of the state presidency became his best choice. This was why Lin Biao's attempt to restore the presidency only made Mao more suspicious of his own designated successor and contributed to Lin's sudden downfall in 1971. Despite Deng's efforts to separate the Party's role from that of government, it is in fact difficult to draw a fine line between the two institutions. Functional ambiguity between the Party and the government created power conflicts between the Party general secretary and the premier

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<sup>5</sup> Zhu Guanglei, *Dandai Zhongguo Zhengfu Guocheng* <Process of Government in Contemporary China>, (Tianjin, China: Tianjin renmin chubanshe<Tainjin People's Press>, 1997), p.77.

throughout the 1980s. This institutional friction has changed considerably since the state presidency was attached to the general secretaryship in 1993.

If past experience and lessons are instructive, the detachment of the presidency from the general secretaryship is likely to create new institutional tension as well as power conflicts between Jiang and Hu Jintao, should Jiang continue to cling to his current two key positions in the Party and military. Interestingly, periods in which one core leader assumed all three positions—the 1950s and the 1990s—were notable for relative lack of political tension. Thus from the perspective of “path dependency,” which emphasizes the impact of past choice on current institutions, it seems more likely that the Chinese elite will follow the informal norm of “anchoring Party leadership to the government.” The sharing of formal political power between state head and Party boss would inevitably involve institutional rearrangement for the two offices in terms of the division of labor. Such sharing may also require an institutional readjustment regarding different roles played by the president and the premier. To change current norms appears at odds with the Party’s goals of realizing institutionalization, standardization and procedural formalization (*zhiduhua, guifanhua, chengxuhua*) of socialist democratic politics, as Jiang stressed in his May 31 speech. In fact, there are no signs in Chinese media and official speeches indicating Beijing is going to resurrect the norm of “separating the Party from the government,” which would be useful to justify Jiang’s clinging to the general secretaryship without the presidency after the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

It might look easier for Jiang to retain the CMC chairmanship than the general secretaryship, but such an action would undercut China’s movement toward institutionalization. In addition to breaking informal rules on the age limit and the unwritten norms on the term limit for Party leaders, Jiang’s retaining the CMC chairmanship alone would be obviously at odds with the basic principle of “the Party commands the gun.” Except for the period between 1981 and 1989, when Deng served as CMC chairman without taking the Party’s top post, the CMC chairmanship has been closely attached to the Party’s supreme leadership in PRC history (e.g., Mao between 1949 and 1976, Hua Guofeng between 1976 to 1981, and Jiang from 1989 on). While Deng created an exception, Jiang has at least two disadvantages in following Deng’s precedent. First, as a charismatic leader, Deng’s prestige among the military men came from his longtime revolutionary experience, especially during wartime. By contrast, Jiang does not have that kind of charisma, and his connections with the army are based on the CMC chairmanship, which normatively came from his general secretaryship.<sup>6</sup> Second, as the “king maker,” Deng handpicked Hu Yaobang as the Party leader in 1981, rather than occupying the position himself. Thus, his control of military and “ruling from behind the curtain” seemed relatively reasonable in a period of power reconfiguration and institution building. However, leadership consolidation and the continued process toward military professionalism during the 1990s have reshaped civil-military relations, making it less necessary or more difficult for Jiang to maintain military power after two terms of service. Remaining in office would also open Jiang to criticism of being greedy for power.

Although Chinese politics is far from transparent and institutionalized, informal rules and unwritten norms nevertheless significantly constrain Jiang’s incentive to cling to his current posts. Unlike Deng who could maintain his paramount leadership without any formal positions after 1989, Jiang must search for a new institutional base for himself if he wants to maintain his influence after the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress.

### **Searching for a New Power Base—Party Congress Empowered**

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<sup>6</sup> When Deng first introduced Jiang as the new CMC chairman to the Party elite in 1989, he said that Jiang would become a good chairman because he had been a good general secretary.

Even though it seems neither feasible nor ideal for Jiang to retain any of his current posts, he is reluctant to relinquish power completely. One indication is that Jiang, like Li Peng, Zhu Rongji and Li Ruihuan, has dropped no hints this year that he will retire at the 16<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress.<sup>7</sup> Such unusual silence, plus a de-emphasis of “the fourth generation of leaders” in Chinese media, does not suggest a clear-cut leadership transition from the third to fourth generation. While spotlighting new leadership—including Hu Jintao, Zeng Qinghong, Wen Jiabao and Luo Gan—in recent months, Beijing may have been searching for a new power base for Jiang and other third generation leaders through institutional innovation (*zhidu chuangxin*).

Institutional innovation is an official term first endorsed by Jiang in his speech during ceremonies of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CCP on July 1, 2001. The term has gained popularity in China’s official speeches and academic discourse since then. Indeed, over past decades, the Chinese reform elite has adopted a cost-saving and shock-reducing gradualist model by developing new institutions from inside the old system. In terms of political reform, they now apparently seek to develop “within-Party democracy” (*dangnei minzhu*) through the strengthening of the existent institutions of Party Congresses and Party Committees at central and local levels. This idea is fully elaborated in a book entitled “A Great Platform for Party Construction in the New Century—Instruction to Studying General Secretary Jiang Zemin’s July 1 Speech,” co-authored by theorists and professors in the Central Party School. Some of the book’s main arguments are as follows:

1. To improve the Party Congress system is fundamental to developing democratic centralism within the Party. The Party Congress system should be as essential to the Party as the NPC system is to the state.
2. At any given level, the Party Congress is the most important body, with power to decide crucial issues (*zhongda shiwu*) and supervise other Party organizations.
3. The Party Congress should convene annual meetings, just as the National People’s Congress has done.
4. Meeting regulations and operation procedures must be improved to ensure good discussion at the Party Congress.
5. The Party Committee should make policies according to decisions made by the Party Congress at the same level, and upon instructions given by the Party Committee at a higher level<sup>8</sup>

These viewpoints of the prestigious Central Party School look more like policy proposals or marching signals than mere academic discussion. As a matter of fact, by the end of 2001 the Party’s Organization Department had selected ten counties nationwide as trial spots where Party Congresses convened annually rather than once every five years.<sup>9</sup>

The 16<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress will probably endorse these arguments and experiments through revising the Party constitution. China’s official journal, *Outlook Weekly*, recently published an article on Party constitution revision containing important remarks by an anonymous professor at the Central Party School. The article argues that the organization system of the Party consists of two basic institutions, Congresses and Committees at different levels, but Party history has been inconsistent as to whether the Congress should convene once every five years (*dingqizhi*) or once a year (*lianhuizhi*), or whether the Congress should have permanent bodies

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<sup>7</sup> John Pomfret, “Chinese Leader Throws a Curve: Jiang’s Reluctance to Retire Could Spark Power Struggle,” *Washington Post*, July 21, 2002, p. A1.

<sup>8</sup> Wang Changjiang, et. al., *xinshiji dang de jianshe de weida gangling—xuexi Jiang Zemin zongshuji qiyi jianghua fudao* <Great Platform for Party Construction in the New Century—Instruction to Studying General Secretary Jiang Zemin’s “July 1” Speech> (Beijing: Central Party School Press, 2001), pp. 126-31.

<sup>9</sup> Li Wenzhong, “*guanyu gaige dangwei ‘yixing heyi’ lingdao tizhi de sikao*” <On Reforming the Leading System of “Combining Executive and Legislative Functions into One Organ” within Party Committees>, *Tizhi Gaige <Institutional Reform>* (Beijing), 2002, No. 4., p.29.

(*changrenzhi*).<sup>10</sup> Mention of such institutional flexibility in an article related to Party constitution revision at such a critical moment suggests that some people within the Party intend to empower the Congress.

If the National Party Congress, an “electoral college” for selecting the Central Committee and a “rubber stamp” for endorsing Party constitution revision, were to transform itself into the “highest decision-making organ,” symbolically or not, it may provide a legitimate institutional base for Jiang Zemin and other third generation leaders. According to precedent, standing members (*changwu weiyuan*) of the presidium to the National Party Congress usually consist of a couple dozen top Party leaders (including the retired, incumbent and forthcoming leaders), led by the incumbent Party general secretary. Thus, as long as the National Party Congress can convene once a year after its 16<sup>th</sup> assembly, Jiang may hope he could remain “the first among the equals” within the empowered presidium for another five years, even if he resigns from his current positions. In this way, he can legitimately keep his status as the supreme leader of the Party at least in name, especially during the meeting periods of the National Party Congress, without breaking precedent and undermining the expected process of smooth leadership transition in an institutionalized way. Other third generation leaders may also find the perpetuated presidium an appropriate post for them to maintain their influence during the transition period, probably better than the outmoded Central Advisory Commission that was abolished ten years ago.

It is too early at this moment—before the crucial *Beidaihe* meeting has ended—to predict whether the Party elite will agree to empower the National Party Congress or reach a consensus on how to redefine a new relationship between the National Party Congress and the Party’s Central Committee. Such an institutional innovation will involve a redistribution of power among the Party elite, especially between the third and fourth generations, and may create new institutional tensions between the National Party Congress and the Central Committee. The final result will be contingent upon behind-the-curtain bargaining and compromise among China’s top leaders, about which our knowledge is limited. However, if past experience is relevant, we should not expect a clear-cut power transfer from third to fourth generation leaders. Some sort of intermediate arrangement in the form of institutional innovation may serve to reduce the shock of leadership transition in China, and gradually ease the veteran incumbents off the center stage of Chinese politics.

## Conclusion

In the absence of free and competitive elections, leadership transition in China is likely to entail great compromise between different generations or result in serious political conflict and chaos. It is not unlikely that Jiang and other third generation leaders are inclined to immortalize their political power, but their intentions are constrained by previous institutional norms and challenged by young leaders who are keen to get out of the shadow. The likely-empowered National Party Congress, even though it is to be convened only once a year and is not comparable to the *de facto* power organs, the Central Committee and its Politburo, may serve as a buffer to render more gradual the leadership transition in China. Based on the Party’s current organization system, its stability-first mentality, and its advocacy for within-Party democracy, such an institutional innovation seems a likely choice for the Chinese elite at this historical juncture of leadership transition.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of leadership succession in China, because power is concentrated at the top and political leaders’ personality can make a great deal of difference in policy, due to insufficient institutionalization. A smooth power transfer from Jiang to Hu at the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress would be the first routine (albeit undemocratic) power transition in PRC history that was not prompted by a political crisis or the death of a top leader. On the other hand, if Jiang refuses to give up his current positions, it will undercut Beijing’s previous

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<sup>10</sup> *Xinhuanet* (Beijing), July 26, 2002; *United Daily* (Taiwan), July 25, 2002.

efforts to abolish the lifetime tenure for Party leaders, and potentially foment a power struggle at the top that might trigger a new round of social protests and political crises as occurred in the 1980s. Such uncertainty has contributed to the immense stake of leadership succession for China's domestic development and international relations, and is likely to stimulate continued speculations on the perplexing power maneuver prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress.