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China's Leadership and the Likelihood of Change

China is preparing to usher in a new generation of leaders. Just don't expect too much in the way of change, argues Axel Berkofsky.

By Axel Berkofsky for ISN

China is warming up for a leadership transition, with current vice-president Xi Jinping the most likely candidate to be at the helm of the Communist Party of China (CCP) by the end of the year. Although Xi still needs to officially announce his intention to run for the position of Party Secretary-General, he is almost certain to do so. If chosen, he would replace incumbent Hu Jintao as party leader in October and become China's president in early 2013. Li Keqiang, a fellow member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC, China's top decision-making body) will most probably become prime minister (as well as president of the country's State Council).

However, this is only if things go according to plan. At a recent seminar, [Dr Kerry Brown](#) of Chatham House noted that while this would seem to be the most likely course of action, it must not be forgotten that China's constitution does not oblige Beijing's leaders or the CCP to follow pre-set procedures for leadership transition along a fixed timetable. The transition's timing could therefore change at any time, Brown cautioned.

Who is Xi?

Like many of his peers in the Politburo and PSC, Xi is a so-called 'princeling'. Xi is the son of Xi Zhongxun, a 'Long March' hero and founding member of the CCP. While Xi initially grew up in the comfort of Zhongnanhai, the party elite's Beijing compound, he was dispatched to the impoverished north-western province of Shaanxi to 'learn from the masses' after his father was purged by Mao Zedong. During the Cultural Revolution he was part of the 'Down to the Countryside Movement' which meant hard physical work, loneliness and seven years in a cave home in Liangjiahe village. After his years in the countryside, Xi joined the CCP in 1974 and quickly made a name for himself as a local party secretary in Hebei province.

Xi then moved on to Fujian province, where he rose through the ranks to become provincial governor in 2000. By 2002 he was governor and party chief of the economically successful Zhejiang province. During his tenure in Zhejiang, NGOs, the Christian Church and business associations experienced a period of unprecedented freedom. Under Xi's rule, industry associations and unions bargained over wages and working conditions, and independent candidates were allowed to compete for seats in

local political bodies.

While he cemented his leadership credentials and loyalty to party values and policies in his terms as governor, his real political breakthrough came in 2007. After the arrest of Shanghai's Party Secretary Chen Liangyu in a pension fund corruption scandal, Xi became the city's party leader in March of that year. His political capital surged thanks to his quiet and efficient handling of the affair. After his six-month tenure in the city, Xi's appointment to the PSC became all but inevitable.

Damage control and consolidating inner-party power

China analysts widely agree that consolidating power within the CCP will be at the very top of Xi's political agenda once elected. Xi needs to demonstrate to rival inner-party factions, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and parts of the nationalist public that he is in command of the most important domestic and foreign policy portfolios. The [arrest](#) of Bo Xilai, the [controversial](#) regional Communist Party chief in the southwestern city of Chongqing, showed that the leadership's ability to control and contain Bo-style rogue high-level party members might not be as firm and sustainable as it used to be. In an [article](#) for the Financial Times, Minxin Pei wrote that "Bo Xilai frightened China's political leadership because he was rather good at playing a different game: instead of quietly and humbly working the corridors of the party establishment, he built up a charismatic public image and forced the party's hand."

What's more, Pei argues, Bo was not a lonely and isolated rogue party member but someone with inner-party sympathizers who could continue to challenge the way the party and the country would be run in the future.

"For the party, Mr Bo the political entrepreneur may be gone, but the trouble caused by his rise and departure is far from over. Mr Bo showed that he - and many others in the party's hierarchy - will no longer abide by such rules, which they view as biased in favor of risk-averse and colorless bureaucrats."

In contrast to the colorful Bo, Xi has worked to underline his longstanding posture as a loyal and obedient team player since joining the inner circle of power in Beijing - one who does not challenge party procedures and personnel policies. Xi Jinping is therefore - on paper at least - the very opposite of Chongqing's former leader Bo Xilai. Accordingly, those hoping for change may have to wait a little longer.

Political reform? Probably not

Andrew Nathan, Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, [argues](#) that little in Xi's political track record suggests that he would seek to introduce anything resembling fundamental change of China's political system. Nathan --like many other China scholars-- believes that any changes related to governance in China will continue to be limited to those strengthening inner-party election and 'selection' processes.

And, Xi going soft on NGOs and Christians and allowing village or township level democracy could very quickly turn out to be a thing of the past, [argues](#) China scholar Bruce Gilley.

"His career in the south coastal provinces showed that he was keen on economic reforms and administrative effectiveness. But the reform era is over, and those debates are past...He cares little for the issues of 'social harmony,' 'people-centered development' and 'scientific development' that have absorbed the attentions of the two Marxist progressives who have been in charge since 2002 (Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao). Instead, his focus is on state power, exerted both domestically and

internationally," Gilley writes.

Foreign policies - business as usual?

Washington already got a taste of what may lie ahead with Xi as China's top leader during US Vice-President Joe Biden's visit to Beijing last August. Xi made it quite clear that his Chinese foreign policy ideas are completely in line with current official Chinese policies. Predictably, he urged Washington to respect what China calls its 'core interests,' a euphemistic warning for the US to not challenge Chinese national sovereignty and territorial integrity on and around the Chinese mainland. Unsurprisingly, Beijing is wary of President Obama's new US security policy strategy for East Asia, which amongst other issues sees an increased US military presence in the region.

While Beijing's policymakers are as anxious as ever about Washington's substantive arms sales to Taiwan, Washington and Beijing will most likely continue to differ sharply on how to treat Iran. China is Iran's biggest importer of crude oil and refuses to support US efforts to tighten sanctions aimed at halting Tehran's nuclear ambitions. Beijing's support of, or opposition to, US policies toward Iran and North Korea could mean the difference between success and failure of US efforts to contain both countries' alleged nuclear weapons programs in the years to come.

A safe choice, Beijing hopes

While Xi is probably more impulsive and more prepared to follow his gut instinct than incumbent Hu Jintao, nobody arrives in China's Politburo Standing Committee without having proven absolute loyalty to the party through the decades.

Xi is a 'safe' choice and hence most probably a disappointment for those inside and outside of China who hoped that China's new political leadership could quickly follow-up on outgoing Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's recent speeches calling for the adoption of more economic and political reforms going beyond the promotion of 'inner-party democracy'.

China's leaders are not ready for fundamental political reform -- and Xi's candidature is proof of that. As Brown [writes](#) in Foreign Policy,

"China's heir apparent is the cleanest, least offensive, most loyal politician the party could find."

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[The Rise of Nationalism in China](#)
[China's Unfinished Revolution](#)
[Watching a Dragon's Egg Hatch](#)

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