

The 16th Congress of the CCP: Implications for Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy

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The Sixteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that concluded on the 14th of November in Beijing was a historic moment for the PRC. Hu Jintao replaced Jiang Zemin as the head of Party and will replace him as the Head of State early next year. The theme of this Congress was to synthesize Chinese capitalist development in the last decade with the CCP's traditional emphasis on socialism. Hence, the Party aims were to "hold high the banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory" and "build a well-off society." This paper outlines the major issues in Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy that are influenced by the change of leadership in the CCP. While foreign policy will be marked by continuity, changes in domestic politics would be far-reaching and more tangible.

Domestic Politics - The Change Within

This was the smoothest transfer of power in the history of the CCP. Earlier successions have been marked by internecine struggles, political purges and periods of domestic instability. Though this succession was smooth, Sinologists like Gordon Chang and Andrew Nathan have criticized it for not been democratic. There is speculation also about Jiang Zemin's continued influence. The fact that he has retained the Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission expresses his intention not to fade away. His predecessor, Deng Xiaoping, despite relinquishing all his official posts strongly influenced Chinese politics upto his death.

Jiang has nominated at least four of his staunch supporters to the Politburo and will thereby continue to be the unofficial locus of power for a long time. It is debatable whether this might end up compromising Hu's leadership within the Party

and state institutions. Since Hu was chosen by Deng Xiaoping and groomed by Jiang, it is more likely, however, that he will continue to seek Jiang's support to consolidate his position. This is not a new phenomenon in the CCP with earlier leaders legitimizing their authority by upholding policies and principles of their predecessors. In his speech to the Press, Hu Jintao declared the total commitment of the Party to implementing Jiang Zemin's development and reform agenda and to following his Thought of the Three Represents.

Deng Xiaoping Theory continues to guide the practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Jiang, has contributed his Thought of Three Represents as a guide to building socialist culture, which refers to the Party representing advanced productive forces, advanced culture and the interests of the vast majority of the people. Three Represents now stands at par with Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory as the guiding ideology of the Party.

Hu Jintao's elevation to the top post in the Party and the State reflects the slow but steady process of political institutionalization started by Deng Xiaoping. This ensures greater continuity between the policies of earlier and succeeding leaders. The radical change in policies that accompanied Deng succession to Mao Zedong is not part of Chinese elite politics anymore. In fact, continuity in economic policies has progressed with both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao remaining committed to economic reforms in China. The major differences now within the CCP are regarding the pace of reforms, and the ways to implement reform measures with minimum social dislocation that may lead to political instability.

The most significant change has been the formal entry of 'red capitalists' or private businessmen into the Party. This proposal was made last year by Jiang but had met with stiff opposition from conservatives in the Party. In the past year, an appreciation of the role played by private investment and entrepreneurship in China's economy seems to have developed. Hence, the extension of Party membership to private businessmen is seen as harnessing the energies of capitalism for socialist modernization. With this the Party has moved away from its revolutionary constituency of workers and peasants; though the rhetoric is that the 'red capitalists' have been elevated to the status earlier enjoyed by workers and peasants in the Party's ideology. This has also been projected by the CCP as an attempt to make the Party more representative. This is, of course, the most effective way of co-opting the growing business community within the Party.

The Party has also voiced a commitment to building socialist democracy by standardizing the Party committees' relations with people's congresses, provincial governments, people's political consultative conference committees and mass organizations. Under this polity, greater political participation at the village level is encouraged without compromising the Party's sacrosanct position in China's political system. According to the Party, national cohesion and domestic stability has grown over the last decade. Strengthening national defense and army-building are major achievements towards enhancing China's role in global politics. Commitment to building a smaller technology-intensive army was repeated by Jiang. He identified three major historical tasks for the Party. These are 'to propel the modernization drive, to achieve national development, and reunification and to safeguard world peace' In this scheme of things, economic development, ending corruption, and reunification of Taiwan are the topmost priorities of the Party.

Continuities in Chinese Foreign Policy

With regard to foreign policy it would appear that continuity was the underlying theme of the Congress. In fact, Jiang Zemin in his report to the Party Congress set out the foreign policy agenda for China's new leadership to follow. Chinese foreign policy is driven by the twin desires to

achieve economic development and national greatness. These themes have endured in China after Deng Xiaoping's succession to Mao. Since 1949, Chinese foreign policy has shifted from an emphasis on the export of revolution to isolationism during the Cultural Revolution to the post-Mao Open Door policy. Deng Xiaoping realized that isolationist policies were disastrous for China and initiated the process of integrating the Chinese economy with the global capitalist economy. This process necessitated profound changes in China's foreign policy. China's reluctant entry into the arena of global politics was marked by a deep suspicion of international organizations dominated by the Western powers. However, as China grew in economic strength and modernized its armed forces, it also became aware of the opportunities offered by playing a greater role in international affairs. One of the fastest growing economies in the world and a permanent seat in the Security Council assure China of a leading role in the global arena.

In following Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy over the last decade, Jiang Zemin has painstakingly constructed China's bilateral relations with its neighbours and major powers and crafted China's role in multi-lateral fora like the UN and the ASEAN. China's participation and commitment to international agreements and regimes has significantly increased during this period. China's recent accession to the WTO marks a new chapter in China's economic and political integration with the international order.

The smooth transfer of power in the Chinese Communist Party will ensure continuity in China's external policies. The process of economic liberalization and political integration set in place by Deng and encouraged by Jiang will be continued under Hu Jintao. At the same time, China's belief that the present global order is undemocratic and needs to be reformed will not change with the new leadership insisting on greater democracy in the conduct of international relations.

Jiang Zemin in his report identified peace and development as the main themes of this era. In his opinion, growing multi-polarization and economic globalization were creating favorable conditions for achieving peace and development. He broadly outlined China's major foreign policy

objectives as opposing hegemonism, fighting terrorism and greater integration with the global economy. He defined the present international political and economic order as “unfair and irrational”.

Following the end of the Cold War China has consistently made an effort to establish a multi-polar international order to counter growing US power. China and the US, as the two most important players in contemporary global politics, share a relationship marked by co-operation and conflict. The challenge before the new leadership in China will be to maintain this delicate balance. Jiang also mentioned China’s commitment to fighting the scourge of terrorism. China stands for increasing international cooperation in this endeavor. This is an area where China and the US share a common concern that will contribute to improving US-China relations.

China’s concern with sovereignty issues has increased over the past three years after the NATO action in Kosovo and the US military action against terrorism in Afghanistan. Both these episodes were essentially US led military interventions, and China has repeatedly urged that the UN should play a greater role in resolving such disputes and problems. China’s concerns stem from its insecurity regarding the possibility of greater US support to Taiwanese independence and Tibet’s movement for self-determination. Stressing the need to respect territorial sovereignty, Jiang said that international disputes should be handled through peaceful means without resorting to the threat or use of force. However, while China professes to prefer the resolution of international disputes by peaceful means, it has not given up its right to use force in achieving reunification of Taiwan with the mainland. The commitment of the new leadership towards the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the stated directive principle of China’s foreign policy, will be tested in this context.

Maintaining its Third World identity, China will continue to aspire for leadership of the developing world. Deng mentioned enhancing solidarity and cooperation with the Third World countries as one of the planks of Chinese foreign policy. In this endeavor China has been highlighting the ‘differentness of Asian values’ to

question the dominant Western international order and its attendant institutions. To what extent this policy will yield tangible benefits for China is a debatable issue.

As for Sino-Indian relations, the leadership change is not likely to make any immediate substantive change. Instead of looking for a change in the content of policy, changes in the modalities of its conducting bilateral relations might be more fruitfully explored. With regard to China’s Tibet policy, it is notable that Hu Jintao is the first CCP leader with a considerable knowledge of the ground situation in Tibet. His experience as Party Chief in Lhasa will be significant for the way Beijing handles its dispute with the Dalai Lama. Though Hu Jintao has the reputation of being a hardliner, the Dalai Lama’s government is appreciative of the fact that he is well acquainted with the Tibetan Affairs.

Conclusion

At the close of the Congress the Party can congratulate itself on a smooth transition to the fourth generation of leadership. Jiang Zemin listed China’s major achievements in the past thirteen years in his report to the Congress. These include China’s assumption of full membership of the World Trade Organization, successfully meeting the challenges posed by the Asian financial crisis and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. However, massive lay-offs, a weak banking system, corruption, regional economic imbalances and the growing need for democratization of its polity will pose big challenges to the ability of the new leadership to successfully steer China on the twin paths of economic development and political stability. Reunification of Taiwan, tackling the Tibet problem, managing its relations with the US and playing a larger role in global politics are the major tasks ahead for its foreign policy.



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