

## CHINA'S NEXT CHAIRMAN—XI JINPING

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Tucked away virtually at the end of the communiqué issued on October 17<sup>th</sup> after the fifth plenary session of the seventeenth Central Committee in Beijing, was a one-line paragraph announcing that China's Vice President, Xi Jinping, had been appointed Vice Chairman of China's Military Commission. The announcement confirms that Xi Jinping, viewed since 2007 as Hu Jintao's putative successor, is firmly on the path to taking over the three all important posts of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), President of China and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), after the Eighteenth Party Congress scheduled to be held in Beijing around October 2012, unless some drastic unforeseen event occurs. It simultaneously negates all speculative reports of factional infighting surrounding Xi Jinping's elevation to the top jobs.

Xi Jinping's appointment was widely anticipated at the last Central Committee plenary session. His appointment now, however, indicates that he will have an apprenticeship of almost two years before he assumes supreme command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The decision to combine the powers of the Party and Military was taken by Deng Xiaoping in 1987 when he anticipated that future generations of Party leaders would not possess military credentials and also not have the support of veteran cadres wielding sufficient authority over the military. These future leaders would, therefore, require greater authority to effectively command and control the PLA. Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang was to be the first such leader, but that did not materialize because of the 'Tiananmen Incident' one and a half years later.

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Jiang Zemin took over in November 1989 as Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) without any preparatory period as the first Vice Chairman because of Deng Xiaoping's insistence that, during that troubled period, the Party must demonstrate its effective and visible command over the PLA. Deng Xiaoping was, however, present and able to intercede when necessary to support Jiang Zemin. The system of phased transfer of power was resumed with Hu Jintao's appointment as first Vice Chairman of the CMC in 1999 and later as Chairman of the CMC, replacing Jiang Zemin, in 2004. Hu Jintao became the first civilian Party leader to take over the reins of the CMC from a civilian predecessor without the benefit of a supportive veteran cadre present on the sidelines. Though Hu Jintao's appointment as CMC Chairman was delayed because of Jiang Zemin's reluctance to relinquish the post, Hu Jintao, in effect took over as CMC Chairman two years after he had become the General Secretary of the Party.

In contrast to Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, neither of whom had any military credentials, Xi Jinping does have some experience in the PLA. After his graduation in Chemical Engineering from Qinghua University, Xi Jinping began work in 1969. He joined the Communist Youth League in 1971 and the CCP in 1974. Because of his father's position in the Party and PLA, Xi Jinping worked in the General Office of the State Council and CMC for almost three years from April 1979 till 1982 when he served as personal secretary to Geng Biao (1909-2000), Politburo member and China's Defence Minister and Secretary General of the CMC. Interestingly, during this period Xi Jinping was an officer in

'active' service. Xi Jinping's military connections were sought to be buttressed in the official account of his career, released by Xinhua on the occasion of the announcement of his recent appointment. This stated that Xi Jinping had almost always been a member of the National Defence Mobilisation committees in the various provinces to which he was posted. In that capacity he would have attended meetings convened by the concerned Military Region and interacted with senior PLA officers.

These periods of service together with his father's military associations have consolidated Xi Jinping's entrée into China's senior military hierarchy. Coincidentally, Xi Jinping's second wife, 47-year old Peng Liyuan, is an accomplished Chinese folk singer who graduated from the Beijing Conservatory of Music and holds the rank of Major General in the PLA!

Xi Jinping, born on June 1, 1953, is the third child of Xi Zhongxun (1913-2002) and his wife Qi Xin. He has two elder sisters and a younger brother. Xi Zhongxun was a veteran Party cadre and one of the founders of a communist guerrilla army of north China and, during the epochal Long March in the mid-1930s, gave Mao Zedong and his troops shelter in the Ya'an area. Xi Zhongxun was accused of plotting against Mao in 1962 and purged for the second time. He was later rehabilitated, but again purged during the Cultural Revolution and this time exiled to the countryside. Xi Jinping's life was scarred by the Cultural Revolution when, following his father's purge, he was sent to the countryside to be re-educated as a peasant and kept away from his family for several years. According to Xinhua, from 1969 to 1975, Xi worked as an "educated youth" sent to the countryside at Liangjiahe Brigade in his home province of Shaanxi where he served as party branch secretary. Xi Zhongxun, who was highly respected in the Party, was a friend and comrade of Deng Xiaoping's who rehabilitated him and appointed him Vice Premier. Xi Zhongxun, was the architect of the Special Economic Zones.

Significantly, Xi Zhongxun opposed the crackdown by the People's

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Liberation Army at Tiananmen in June 1989. Also, among the websites shut down by the authorities in late 2009, when the conservative viewpoint on handling minorities began to gain ascendancy, were some operated by NGOs and cadres with more liberal viewpoints associated with the late Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang and Vice Premier Xi Zhongxun, father of current Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping.

As the son of a senior Party cadre, Xi Jinping is a 'princeling'. The 'princelings' constitute a fairly powerful grouping in the Party and military apparatus in China. They have also been assiduously cultivated and promoted by Hu Jintao especially in the PLA. Xi Jinping can currently bank on the support of a number of senior military cadres who are also 'princelings'. These include: Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of General Staff of the PLA; Li Jinan, Director of the PLA's powerful General Political Department; Wu Shengli, Commander of the PLA Navy and CMC member; Xu Qiliang, Commander of the PLA Air Force and CMC member; Peng Xiaofeng, Political Commissar of the Second Artillery; Liu Yuan, Political Commissar of the Academy of Military Sciences; Zhang Youxin, Commander of the Shenyang Military Region; and Zhang Haiyang, Political Commissar of Chengdu Military Region. Xi Jinping will additionally benefit from the Party's strengthened grip over the PLA brought about by Hu Jintao. Hu Jintao launched successive and thorough year-long

'education' campaigns throughout the PLA for three consecutive years to instill the concept that the Party exercises 'absolute' control over the army. He also augmented the powers of the General Political Department and political commissars by giving them veto authority over PLA officers' promotions. Hu Jintao has simultaneously, since his term as Vice Chairman of the CMC, built up a core of loyalists in the senior echelons of the PLA. He is thus far estimated to have promoted over 50 officers to the rank of General and a number of others in grade

promotions to senior appointments while awaiting rank promotions that come in routine course. This consolidation of civilian political control over the PLA will help Xi Jinping too.

Additionally Xi Jinping has supporters in the top echelons of the CCP which include Song Ping, Zhu Rongji, Li Peng, Hu Jintao, Zhou Yongkang and the former Head of the CCP CC's Organisation Department, He Guojiang. Other supporters include some of the 'princelings' in the Party.

Whether Xi Jinping's elevation finally to the top posts will signal a change in China's domestic and foreign policies is debatable. Prior to this appointment and in an indication that he is being groomed for the top jobs, Xi Jinping had visited countries viewed by China as important including

Japan, Australia, Mongolia, Myanmar and Bangladesh as well as countries in Latin America and Europe. The communiqué mentioning Xi Jinping's appointment particularly dwelt on the international political situation and the challenges that are likely to confront China. It contained a suggestion that the review of China's Asia policy, that had begun late last year, had either been finalized or was nearing finalization. Xi Jinping's military affiliations and pronounced linkages with senior PLA officers suggest that the military will continue to receive high budgetary allocations. The emphasis on modernization of the

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While Xi Jinping has not yet visited India, he has met Indian officials and leaders in Beijing. For example, on August 8, 2008 Xi Jinping met Congress President Ms Sonia Gandhi and her son, Rahul, in Beijing when they had gone to see the Summer Olympics. He had then thanked India for taking "effective" steps to ensure smooth passage of the Olympic torch relay in New Delhi and for backing Beijing's efforts to stage a "unique and well-run" Games. Xi Jinping said India had ensured the success of the Indian leg of the Olympic torch relay in New Delhi and "for that,

we express our deep gratitude". The reference was to the threats by pro-Dalai Lama Tibetan protesters to sabotage the torch relay in New Delhi on April 17. The following month, on September 8, he met M.K.Narayanan, then India's National Security Advisor and Special Representative, who was in Beijing to attend the 12th Sino-Indian meeting on the boundary issue. During the meeting, Xi Jinping appreciated the all-round development of China-India relations. He pledged that China was committed to developing the strategic and cooperative partnership of peace and prosperity with India, adding that friendly Sino-Indian relations would benefit both, Asia and the world as a whole. "The two sides should view the bilateral ties from a strategic and long-term perspective,

and expand the common ground and properly handle the differences so as to push forward the long-term and stable relations," he added. On the boundary issue, Xi Jinping hoped that under the guidance of the leaders of both countries, a fair and reasonable framework acceptable to both sides would be worked out at an early date through equal consultation and friendly dialogue. He concluded with the remark that "both should maintain peace and tranquility in the border area before the boundary issue is resolved". More recently on May 28, 2010, Xi Jinping met visiting Indian President Ms Pratibha Patil and Foreign Secretary Ms Nirupama Rao at a

reception in Beijing to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishment of ties.

Xi Jinping is well versed with Taiwan issues and developed connections with numerous Taiwanese businessmen during his almost seventeen years in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces. He also headed the Leading Group on Hongkong and Macau. His wife visited Taiwan for eight days as part of a cultural delegation in 1997 and his brother-in-law has been living for some years in Taiwan's southern Chiayi county.

Xi Jinping met North Korean 'leader' Kim Jong Il during the latter's visits to Beijing in 2008 and subsequently. An oblique suggestion of North Korea's desire to continue the present level of bilateral relations during Xi Jinping's upcoming term was contained in a congratulatory message. The official North Korean newspaper Rodong Sinmun

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published the message issued on the occasion of Xi Jinping's appointment to "the important post".

In domestic matters pertaining to the minorities, though Xi Jinping has experience of remote and poor provinces and can be expected to encourage their development, he is unlikely to introduce relaxation in national policies and programmes. Xi Jinping's presence at both the national work conferences held in the first half of this year, on Tibet and Xinjiang where certain tough measures were approved, were in fact specifically pointed out in official 'Xinhua' newsagency despatches. It is nevertheless interesting that Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, was an interlocutor for the Dalai Lama's Special Envoy Lodi Gyari in the 1980s and apparently carried a photo of the Dalai Lama. Prior to that he had some association with the 10th Panchen Lama, Tibet's second most important religious leader. Such links, however, are unlikely to influence Xi

Jinping's stance on Tibet as that will have wider implications for the six million Tibetans and also for the peace and stability of China and the border regions.

On domestic political issues as on most others, Xi Jinping has been very circumspect. He has not commented on issues like political reform. However, his father's 'liberal' thinking and viewpoints could have left an imprint. At the same time, Xi Jinping is a Party apparatchik who has been a beneficiary of the system. Xi Jinping is very unlikely to do anything that could weaken the Party or its monopoly on power, though he might tinker on the edges of limited and gradual political reform. Xi Jinping is credited with pushing economic reforms and has earned a reputation for 'getting things done'. His management of the prestigious Summer Olympics was appreciated. These views could be reflected in the ensuing economic reform policies.



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