

**A POLITICAL GOLD MEDAL FOR
XI JINPING: THE SUCCESSFUL
BEIJING OLYMPICS**

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Executive Summary

1. As the likely successor to the top leadership at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, Xi Jinping was put in charge of the preparations of the Beijing Olympics, which became a real political test to his way to power zenith.
2. The successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics further established Xi as a national leader, and his involvement in the Games helped him to accumulate bureaucratic experiences in coordinating the military, police, party and different governmental bureaucracies in Beijing and the localities.
3. If Xi becomes the Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission this year or next, his heir-apparent status will be further confirmed.
4. Xi's position today is similar to Hu Jintao's after 1992, when the Party's senior leaders including Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun selected Hu to the Political Bureau Standing Committee as the youngest member to ensure a smooth power transition after Jiang Zemin.
5. To institutionalize such candidacy and ensure that the future successor can have broad experience over the country's domestic politics, economy, national defense as well as foreign affairs, several stepping stones are needed.
6. After becoming China's Vice President and President of the Central Party School, Xi has more exposure to state and party affairs.
7. Xi is also more involved in foreign affairs and his name more publicized in domestic media than his competitor Li Keqiang. Xi has been receiving more foreign guests in Beijing, while Li has been focusing on domestic economic and social affairs.

8. In a speech immediately after the Olympics, Xi put special focus on “collective leadership,” indicating his understanding of the concept of power-sharing with checks and balances for future leadership.
9. As the first among equals in the next generation of CCP leaders, Xi himself has proved to be more high profile than Hu Jintao in their candidacy period. This is because the collective leadership succession model imposes peer pressure and fosters competitions among rising stars.
10. Current Political Bureau composition suggests that after the 18th Party Congress in 2012, the Political Bureau Standing Committee will probably, for the first time, be shared by princelings and youth league cadres (*tuan pai*).

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Passing the Critical Test of the Beijing Olympics

- 1.1 On 24 August, the Beijing Olympics came to a successful close. The Games were seen as an unparalleled success by most Chinese — their team's topping the gold medal table had inspired nationwide excitement, while the city's hospitality and efficiency had impressed foreign visitors.
- 1.2 With no terrorist attacks or other eye-catching disruptive incidents in Beijing during the 17 days, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s efforts at making the Games a priority task in the past few years paid off. It was praised as a "truly exceptional Games" by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Jacques Rogge at the closing ceremony.¹
- 1.3 The successful Games have also been slated as Chinese Vice State President Xi Jinping's "coming out party," thus strengthening his heir-apparent position. Xi was put in charge of the Beijing Games, which became his first big political test since he emerged as China's leader-in-waiting at the 17th Party Congress in October 2007.²
- 1.4 The Beijing Olympics further established Xi as a national leader while ensuring a smooth leadership succession for the party. Xi had abundant local

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¹ "Rogge: Beijing Olympics 'truly exceptional Games'," *Xinhua News*, 24 Aug. 2008

² Officially, Beijing's Party Secretary Liu Qi, a lower-ranking Politburo member, remained the top organizer of the Beijing Games, but in the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee, the *de facto* highest decision-making group, Xi was designated to take charge of preparations for the Games after the 17th Party Congress.

governance experience before being granted the first candidateship to paramount power, but he was still untested in handling state affairs at the national level.

- 1.5 Only the Beijing Olympics could serve as such a test task for Xi. It was a comprehensive mission that involved not only foreign affairs, but also security, logistics, transportation, media management, environment protection and other preparatory work that needed extensive domestic coordination among the military forces (PLA), police, party, and different governmental bureaucracies and localities.
- 1.6 The number of terrorist plots by Xinjiang Muslim separatists, the protests along the global Olympic torch relay route triggered by the Tibet violent riots in March, as well as the increasing domestic unrest amidst rising inflation and social inequality in 2008 heaped the Games with such high risks and such great international pressure that it was almost impossible for the organizers to handle. With the Party and people having high expectations for success, there was little room for failure.
- 1.7 Under such circumstances, Xi made an important adjustment to the goals of the Games from “the best Olympics” to a “safe Olympics.” In a keynote speech at a conference a month before the Olympics’ opening ceremony, Xi said that “a safe Olympics is the biggest indicator of the success of the Games.”³
- 1.8 Thanks to the Party’s skills in mobilizing the nation, and partly, Xi’s gifted coordination ability, the Games went well as China’s leaders had hoped for. Xi’s passing this crucial test smoothly means he is nearer to the crown.
- 1.9 To institutionalize such takeover and ensure that the future successor has a broad outlook of the country’s domestic politics, economy, national defense as well as foreign affairs, Xi, according to the division of labor in the Political

³ Edward Cody, “Across China, Security Instead Of Celebration,” *Washington Post*, 19 July 2008, Page A01

Bureau Standing Committee, was asked to be more involved in state and party affairs than his peer Li Keqiang, who participated more deeply in the economic and administrative work.

- 1.10 Almost all of Xi's activities during the Games were representing the state, in line with his identity as China's Vice State President and implying the inevitability of his taking over the state leadership in the next term.
- 1.11 During the Games, Xi played the second most high-profile role next to State President Hu Jintao. Xi not only met a number of important foreign guests including Singapore's Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and U.S. President George W. Bush, but also inspected major Olympic venues and all the co-host cities in China and hosted a dinner banquet for members of the International Olympic Committee in Beijing.
- 1.12 His response to the chorus of criticism against China on the Olympics was, "We don't care whether people like Beijing's hosting of the Olympics. There are all kinds of people in this vast world and that is what makes the world very lively." Such remarks suited the taste of the Western world, showing his flexibility and charm in the international arena.
- 1.13 Xi also showed his soft power in athletics. He was the motivational force behind the national sadness over the injury of Chinese hurdler Liu Xiang, China's first gold medallist in a men's track and field event in the 2004 Olympics, who was unable to compete in the 110-meter hurdles in Beijing.⁴

Stepping Stones to Paramount Leadership

- 2.1 Xi's position today is similar to Hu Jintao's in 1992, when the Party's senior leaders including Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun selected Hu into the Political

⁴ Xi telegraphed the General Administration of Sport to express concern and sympathy for Liu Xiang, saying "we all understand that Liu quit the race due to injury," and "we hope that after he recovers, he will continue to train hard and struggle harder for the national glory."

Bureau Standing Committee as the youngest member to ensure a smooth power transition after Jiang.

- 2.2 In 1993, Hu took charge of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee, which oversaw day-to-day operations of the Central Committee, and became President of the Central Party School, a convenient tool for him to build his connections with other high-rank CCP cadres and thus his own supporters.
- 2.3 Five years later in 1998, Hu became Vice State President. And one year thereafter, he was appointed Vice Chairman of the Central Military Committee (CMC). By that time, his position as successor was firmly installed. These two positions –Vice President and Vice Chairman of CMC – helped him to gain diplomatic and military experience that other provincial leaders lack.
- 2.4 Xi Jinping is on a similar path. Xi entered the Political Bureau Standing Committee at the 17th Party Congress and became the top-ranking member of the Secretariat of the CCP. Two months later, Xi assumed the post of President of the Central Party School. At the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress in March 2008, he was elected as the country’s Vice State President.
- 2.5 The Vice-Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission is a key position for the final confirmation of the heir-apparent position. During the 17th Party Congress in 2007, Xi did not join the Central Military Commission, showing that the succession issue remained open at that time and Xi was required to pass more tests before establishing his leadership.⁵
- 2.6 It took Hu seven years to assume the Vice-Chairmanship of the CMC Committee after joining the Political Bureau Standing Committee. To secure such a position, Hu had to pass the test of handling knotty diplomatic issues such as the US bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade in 1999. As

⁵ It was reported that Xi might be elected Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission in the 3rd Plenary Session of the 17th CCP Central Committee in 2008. See “Xi Jinping: CCP must form central collective leadership,” *Lianhe Zaobao*, 3 Sept. 2008

compared to Hu, Xi's possible succession is more imminent, which means he will take over this military position in a much shorter time.

- 2.7 The complicated Hong Kong and Macau issue, China's foreign affairs and the Beijing Olympics are tests for Xi, while Li Keqiang is tested on economic work and administrative reforms.⁶ As long as they do not make serious mistakes in these areas, their future leadership will be established as expected.
- 2.8 Xi replaced his patron Zeng Qinghong as the head the Central Leading Group on Hong Kong and Macao Affairs in November 2007. The CCP is now facing challenges in both places: Hong Kong people's demand for general elections and Macau's corruption and widening income gap.
- 2.9 To Xi's advantage, the National People's Congress in December 2007 set the timetable for Hong Kong's general election of its Chief Executive to 2017 after many years of strife between Beijing and the pro-democracy forces in Hong Kong.
- 2.10 Xi has been much more involved in foreign affairs and his name publicized in domestic media than his competitor Li Keqiang. Xi has been receiving more foreign guests in Beijing, while Li has been focusing on domestic economic and social affairs.
- 2.11 Due to the division of labor among leaders, even in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, the most serious disaster in 30 years, Xi only visited disaster areas in Shaanxi and Gansu and steered clear of the worst-hit areas in Sichuan Province.
- 2.12 From June 17-25, 2008, Xi paid his first visit to foreign countries after becoming China's Vice State President. All the five nations he visited, namely North Korea, Mongolia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Yemen, are very friendly and strategically important to China. North Korea and Mongolia are neighboring

⁶ Li Keqiang assists Premier Wen Jiabao in the implementation of macro-control economic policies and "super-ministry reform."

countries related to China's security concern, while the other three oil-rich West Asian countries are of increasing importance to China due to an international oil price hike.

- 2.13 As Xi's "competitor" to some extent, Li Keqiang's posture to succeed premiership has also become increasingly evident after he became Vice Premier in March, 2008. He has been more involved in domestic economic and social affairs, playing a more prominent role in the Sichuan Earthquake relief work and economic macro-control (*hongguan tiaokong*) than Xi.
- 2.14 In July 2008, Li replaced Wen as Director of the State Council Three Gorges Project Construction Committee. According to previous practices, only Chinese Premiers assumed such a post during their tenure. Li Peng, Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao consecutively headed the State Council Three Gorges Project Construction Committee after its establishment in 1993.

"Intra-party Democracy" and "Collective Leadership"

- 3.1 The first important speech Xi made publicly after the Beijing Olympics was his opening address for the new semester of the Central Party School in September 2008. In his speech, Xi put special focus on the formation of the solid "central collective leadership"⁷ to ensure CCP's correct decision making and effective implementation of policies.
- 3.2 The evolution of the four generations of Chinese leaders illustrates a consistent trend towards a more collective leadership, and away from "strong-man" politics.⁸ Unlike Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping who owned omnipotent political power due to their charisma and revolutionary credentials, both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had to command respect by building on broad administrative experiences, patron-client ties and political compromises.

⁷ "Xi Jinping: CCP must form central collective leadership," *Lianhe Zaobao*, 3 Sept. 2008

⁸ Cheng Li, "China's Leadership, Fifth Generation," *Caijing Magazine*, Dec. 2007

- 3.3 The profound shift in the source and legitimacy of leadership succession becomes even more salient for the emerging fifth generation of leaders. Many of the rising stars of the new generation share similarities in terms of leadership credentials, but differ significantly with respect to socio-political backgrounds and career paths.⁹
- 3.4 The duo candidanship (Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang) in the Political Bureau Standing Committee is a new model for CCP's leadership succession, and Xi fully understands that even if he smoothly takes over the top position in the next term, he has to share power with Li and other rising stars much more than his predecessors.
- 3.5 Besides the two front-runners, another four "young" men in their 50s¹⁰ entered the Political Bureau in the 17th Party Congress in 2007. These six Political Bureau members jointly form the main part of a succession team expected to replace the fourth generation of leaders led by Hu Jintao in 2012-2013.
- 3.6 As none of them holds overwhelming political advantages over the others, more power-sharing with checks and balances and more pluralistic decision-making process are expected of the leadership in Xi's era.
- 3.7 Compared with previous power handovers where "heir-apparents" were appointed by charismatic leaders, such collective leadership succession model fosters competition and outstanding performance among rising stars rather than low-profile styles of leadership.
- 3.8 At this stage, Xi Jinping himself has proved to be more high-profile than Hu Jintao in their candidacy period. Overshadowed by Jiang Zemin, Hu played a very low-profile role in the political arena in the early stage of his candidacy; he was rarely involved in eye-catching diplomatic or domestic activities.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ They are Vice Premier Wang Qishan, Central Organization Department Director Li Yuanchao, Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai and Guangdong Party Secretary Wang Yang.

- 3.9 Collective leadership has at least two implications for Xi. First he has to perform in certain areas to outrun his peers and justify his candidacy. Second, he also needs teamwork and support from his colleagues (some may be his rivals) for decision making and policy implementation when the governance of the world's most populous country is evolving so rapidly.

Future Political Bureau: Domination of Princelings and Youth League Cadres

- 4.1 Xi's and Li's rise as China's future top leaders indicates an evident trend in China's political arena: offsprings of previous CCP leaders (princelings) and officials with Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) working experience (*tuan pai*) have become the dominant force in the ruling party.
- 4.2 Among the current 25 Political Bureau members, 11 were born after 1944; they are very likely to stay in the Political Bureau or even enter the Standing Committee (Xi and Li are already in the Standing Committee) in the next term.¹¹
- 4.3 Of the 11 members, seven, namely, Xi Jinping, Wang Qishan, Liu Yandong, Li Yuanchao, Zhang Dejiang, Yu Zhengsheng and Bo Xilai have princeling background while five, namely Li Keqiang, Liu Yunshan, Liu Yandong, Li Yuanchao and Wang Yang have CCYL working experiences.
- 4.4 This suggests that after the 18th Party Congress in 2012, the Political Bureau Standing Committee, the *de facto* top decision-making body, will for the first time be shared by princelings and CCYL cadres. Princelings have an edge over others not only because they have good political network and connections, but also because they are loyalists to the CCP and understand all kinds of formal and informal rules in China's bureaucracy.

¹¹ There is an informal rule in the Politburo that requires the retirement of 68-year-old-or-above members during the personnel reshuffling. The next Party Congress is expected to be held in 2012.

- 4.5 Cadres in the CCYL bureaucracy are on average much younger than their peers in other government or party departments because their work target the youths. They are usually promoted faster and this comparative advantage in age could become decisive in a political system that lacks elections and clear criteria for evaluating merits.
- 4.6 Competitions to some extent do exist between princelings and CCYL cadres, but they are mild and within control. The two groups have no ideological differences and are similarly supportive of reform and the open-door policy as well as the one-party domination.
- 4.7 Given the fact that the CCYL system has become the most important training ground for the political leadership, more princelings may join the CCYL to accelerate promotion. CCYL cadres on the other hand also see the benefit of networking with the princelings. The two groups tend to converge in the long run; speculation of a conflict between the two groups undercutting CCP's ruling seems groundless.
- 4.8 In the incumbent Political Bureau, Li Yuanchao and Liu Yandong are both princelings and CCYL cadres. Li, born in 1950 and a doctorate from the Central Party School, is likely to head China's parliament (National People's Congress) after 2012 and become one of the troika together with Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang.
- 4.9 Although power is still highly concentrated at the top in today's China, whoever ultimately succeeds can no longer make a great deal of difference to the political system. The political game has been transformed from the conventional model of "winner-takes-all" to the new model of power sharing, a non-zero-sum game that entertains the possibility of multiple winners.¹²

¹² Bo Zhiyue, *China's Elite Politics: Political Transition and Power Balancing*, Singapore: World Scientific (2007), p. 7-8

- 4.10 Highly institutionalized and framed by compromises among factions, this succession issue is no longer a cause for political instability. What matters is how to train and select successors through power-balancing. With the gradual improvement of “intra-party democracy,” the CCP is expected to fully institutionalize its power succession process.