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Introductory Observations:

China's generational change of leadership, a process which commenced in 2002, seems to have been fully completed on September 19, 2004 when President Hu Jintao replaced former Chinese President Jiang Zhemín as Chairman of the Central Military Commission.

It would be recalled that Hu Jintao had in 2002 taken over as Chinese Communist Party chief and in 2003 replaced Jiang Zhemín as President of China.

President Hu Jintao, at a comparatively young age of 61 years by Chinese leadership standards, has emerged as the most powerful man in China today. Besides being Party Chief and President, his new assumption of office of the Chairman, Central Military Commission gives him the undisputed command of China's mammoth military machine i.e. the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army (PLA).

China is not super power but a key global player and in that respect figures as a key strategic determinant in global and Asian security and strategic calculations. Hence any generational change in leadership has profound implications for world capitals and therefore merits analysis in terms of implications and prospects.

But first, a look at the personality of China's most powerful man today.

President Hu Jintao- Career and Personality Traits:

Hu Jiantao was born in 1942 in Taizhou city, Jiangsu Province. Educated at Qianghua University and graduated in 1965 as a hydraulics engineer. His career graph in China's Communist Party (CCP) in terms of notable assignments ran as follows:

- 1985-1993 Secretary CPC, Tibet Autonomous Region.
- March 1998 Vice President, PRC.
- Sep 1999 Vice Chairman, CMC
- 2002 CCP Chief
- 2003 President PRC
- 2004 Chairman CMC

His character sketch as given by Xinhua lists the following traits:

- Principled man with strategic vision; good at reading overall situation and making innovations.
- Quick minded and attentive to details.
- Does solid work and dares to take decisions at critical moments.
- Democratic in his style of work, easy of approach, sedate and modest, with a strong personal charisma.

In contrast to the above the then Hong Kong magazine ASIA WEEK made the following observations in 2001:

- Frontrunner to succeed Jiang Zhemin in 2003.

- Been around since 1980.
- Deng hailed him as the core of the 'Fourth Generation' leaders who could take China's helm
- Ran Tibet from 1988-1992. Unflinchingly gave orders to shoot Tibetan demonstrators at the time of the Tienenman Square stand-off.
- Very smart, photogenic, photographic memory but extremely reserved.
- Knows enough of backroom politics and deal-making.

In terms of overall analysis, it can be summed-up, that behind the smart and photogenic personality, President Hu Jintao can be expected to be ruthless and firm and decisive in crisis. After all to rise up to the top of the ladder in China, through the rigorous maze of CCP hierarchy, calls for steely determination, perseverance and manoeuvring without sentiments.

Former President Jiang Zhemim's Displacement from Chairmanship, Central Military Communism Not Orderly:

Media reports on the subject tend to term Jiang Zhemim's displacement from chairmanship of CMC as orderly and that it has been a smooth transition. This does not seem to be the case, at all.

Analytically the following factors convey the contrary:

- Jiang Zhemim was supposed to continue as Chairman CMC till 2007 as per his normal tenure.
- The succession would have been orderly and smooth if the transition had taken place in 2007. Citing health grounds for resignation of Jiang Zhemim is not convincing
- Reports of differences over policy discords between President Hu Jintao and Jiang Zhemim had been surfacing in the preceding period.
- Jiang Zhemim's protégés for the post of Vice Chairman CMC (vacated by Hu Jintao) and the expanded CMC seems to have been sidelined by President Hu Jintao.

What is not evident at this stage is whether:

- Pressure for premature displacement of Jiang Zhemín came from political circles of CCP.
- Or, whether, an impatient PLA desiring a younger, dynamic and aggressive leadership wanted President Hu Jintao to step in.

While China likes to maintain that the PLA is under the firm political control of the CCP, but it is widely believed and is common knowledge that the PLA is the actual power behind the throne, especially after the Tienanmen Square military crackdown on political dissent.

Civil Military Relations in Generational Change of Leadership-Synergy or Dissonance?

China's generational change of leadership has not been exclusively confined to the country's political leadership only. Generational change of leadership has also taken place in the PLA's military hierarchy too. No longer present in both hierarchies are veterans of the "Long March" with shared politico-military experiences and the binding bonds of joint struggles.

China for the first time since 1949, is witnessing the emergence of two different sets of political and military hierarchies, even though both would be professing allegiance to the CCP.

Analytically, the following questions arise in this context:

- China's civil-military relations. Can synergy be achieved or will there be dissonance?
- Can President Hu Jintao with no military experience at all (unlike his earlier predecessors) be able to exercise effective control over the PLA military hierarchy?
- In such an uncertain stage, will the PLA emerge as a greater force in the formulation of China's policies?

These questions can only be answered with the passage of time, but, one thing is certain, and that is, China's civil-military relations are going to pass through testing times. It also has consequent effects on China's foreign policies and strategic postures.

New Leadership's Policy Approaches to the United States:

China is under increasing strategic pressure from the United States both in East Asia and Central Asia. Russia is no longer the countervailing power in these regions and the American supremacy is likely to continue for a number of decades.

Unlike former President Jiang Zhemín who seemed to have struck personal chords of friendly relationships with American leaderships, President Hu Jintao does not seem to have established any such rapport.

On the contrary, political analysts believe that President Hu Jintao favours closer relationships with West European countries than with the United States and Japan. This is cited as one of the policy discords between Hu Jintao and Jiang Zhemín. The above could become a complicating factor for China's global relationships and also in the East Asian context.

China's Immediate Strategic Challenges Under New Generation Leadership:

Shorn of the revolutionary fervour and revolutionary approaches of earlier generations of leadership, China's 'Fourth Generation' leadership faces two major critical foreign policy and strategic challenges, namely North Korea and Taiwan.

In both these critical challenges facing China today, it gets pitted against the United States. The United States is the globally predominant superpower with a substantive strategic and military superiority over China.

While in the case of North Korea, China may play along the parleys-route with the United States, but it is unlikely that China would subscribe to the nuclear de-fanging of North Korea.

Taiwan presents a far more formidable challenge to China's new generation of political and military leadership. Any Chinese military escalation of the conflict with Taiwan is most likely to draw American military intervention. In that eventually, the military conflict will not be a "limited war" confined to the Taiwan Straits region and China. The United States could be tempted to enlarge it to the Western flanks of China also.

Should the new political leadership in China fumble over Taiwan or adopts weak-kneed postures there is every likelihood of the PLA embarking on a military take-over of China. After all, it should not be forgotten that the PLA itself has been a political machine and a political instrument in China's governance. It would not have any inhibitions in asserting any political ambitions that may emerge in such a contingency as outlined above.

Concluding Observations:

Generational changes in leadership in any country are mostly always the harbingers of hope and optimism for greater stability and prosperity. In the case of China it does not seem so for two good reasons. Firstly, it is the uncertainties that are likely to prevail in China's civil-military relations as a result of generational changes in both sets of political and military hierarchies. Secondly, even if China's civil-military relations become synergistic, China's deep-rooted and rigid strategic postures on North Korea and Taiwan carry in themselves the seeds of military conflict with the United States and its allies in East Asia.

China's propensity to use force is unlikely to be restrained by a generational change in Chinese leadership. It basically arises from a

misperception that all armed conflicts like in the past in Korea and Vietnam would continue to remain as “Limited Wars”. The United States may not offer this luxury to China in any future conflict. The new generation Chinese leadership therefore has to restrain itself from such strategic and military gambles.

Lastly, as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council, it is incumbent on China to restrain itself from its propensity for conflict and strategic destabilization of China’s contiguous regions.

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