



## **China's Leadership: Lack of Nimbleness Exposed**

by Francesco Sisci

BEIJING - It is the biggest crisis between United States and China since the Korean War, and it's the greatest Chinese "victory" over the U.S. ever.

In the past, the existing Chinese power structure would have been more than enough to handle these developments. But at present, when political leaders are chased by fast-moving media pouring millions of continually more strident words onto the Internet, the Chinese power structure has appeared dangerously slow to react and unable to cope with the many pressing demands the American side has been piling on its table. The result could thus be a deepening of the crisis and a multiplication of the political snares on the path leading to the eventual return of the damaged U.S. surveillance plane.

But let's first take a step back.

China's power structure has been evolving from the times of Mao Zedong to that of President Jiang Zemin. In the past, Mao was the ultimate decision-maker. He consulted with other party veterans but was the unchallenged emperor. No one, not even all the other leaders together, had veto power over his decisions. The memorable dramas of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution stem from this: the impossibility to challenge Mao even when he was so wrong that most of the party (not to mention the public) opposed him.

The intentions of the Chinese leadership after Mao's demise were to build a wide process of consensus that would guarantee no decisions were to be taken against the party's overall agreement. But to guarantee the serviceability of the party and rapid responses from the leadership in times of crisis, the anointed leader, ie, the party's general-secretary, was given some autonomy, while remaining under the scrutiny of an ad hoc body, a senior advisory council where elderly party veterans were grouped.

The system didn't work. The Tiananmen crisis, reflected in the contradictory instructions coming from the leadership and the indecisiveness of the party for weeks, was born out of this cumbersome structure where it was not clear who was ultimately responsible for what. In the end, a seeming paradox took place: party chief Zhao Ziyang was ousted because he was accused of having engaged in activities to split the party. The accusation didn't make sense *prima facie*, because the party chief wouldn't have any interest in splitting the party. It made better sense against the backdrop of the complex party structure where Zhao took initiatives that were censored by the elderly party leaders who ultimately could and did veto his actions.

Aside from Zhao's possible personal responsibility, there was also the responsibility of the then power structure, which was subsequently changed. Retired leaders were moved out of the decision-making process but the party chief was given less room to maneuver and had to conduct deeper consultations with other Politburo members to ensure widespread support for any policy.

This development also had deeper rationales. Over the past 20 years, the economic interests of ministries and provinces have been growing apart. Furthermore, the authority of the present leadership is less strong than during the era of Deng Xiaoping, where top cadres had made their bones fighting as revolutionary commanders for decades. Today's situation calls for larger consensus among ministries, provinces and Politburo members to forestall risky internal rifts where society and the country could be torn apart by battling factions.

The course is to move toward a regularization of internal discussion on internal democratization. Yet the timetable could not be the one that the party would prefer.

Chinese leaders' reactions to the present crisis have been sluggish. One reason is certainly that Beijing's leaders were taken by surprise, but so were U.S. leaders. Yet the Americans reacted fast, whereas the Chinese have been far more cumbersome.

The reason is clear. The Chinese ambassador in Washington, or the regional army commander, the counterparts of the super-active U.S. Ambassador Joseph Pruhar and Admiral Dennis Blair, have no clear mandate. All decisions are taken in Beijing where, however, not even President Jiang Zemin has a clear mandate to decide by himself what to do. In fact, if he were to take any decision without ample consultations, whatever the decision someone would hold it against him, thus jeopardizing Jiang's position and, most importantly, the smooth party succession organized for next year at the 16th Party Congress.

These delicate Chinese internal problems are impossible to explain to an excited crowd of Americans who just want the return of their servicemen and women and their plane. To this crowd, pounding on President George W Bush's door, the Chinese leaders should give fast, straight answers. But to do this, Chinese leaders need a clear, authoritative political mandate, irrevocable for a given number of years, which is just the opposite of the party tradition. Here the mandate can be revoked at any given time, without any of the complexities required, as for instance in America for the impeachment process. It means the mandate is weak because it is based on fairly limited consultations and the decision of a score of people.

China thought it could take some five years or so to come up with political reforms, but this crisis proves that the historical moment may not allow Beijing as much time as it hoped for. The problem at hand now is to solve the crisis as fast as possible, to avoid unfathomable complications. China has already received

plenty of benefits from the incident and it should not seek too much more.

An ancient Chinese strategy dictates allowing a defeated enemy to escape, because if the enemy has its back against the wall then the wall could provide the stamina to reverse the situation. In the short run, Beijing should arguably keep this in mind. Otherwise, the public pounding on Bush's door could force his administration into an escalation which is against China's best interests.

After the crisis, though, political reform appears an absolute must as China's international stature demands that Chinese leaders have the authority and nimbleness to handle difficult international situations in this or any other fast-moving environments.

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