



## **Hu's Mini 'New Deal'** by Yu Bin

China's National People's Congress began its annual deliberations this week. The meeting marks the debut of the fourth generation of leaders led by Hu Jintao - appointed Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary general last year - who are posed to steer China toward a different mode of politics.

### **From 'rule of man' to 'rule of law'**

Contrary to conventional wisdom in the West that Hu remains a "who" in the shadow of Jiang Zemin, the new party secretary has clearly emerged with both new style and new policies.

In a highly publicized first Politburo "collective study session" on Dec. 26, 2002, Hu focused on the rule of law (fa zhi) and the role of the constitution. Although Jiang has not yet completely faded away, the emphasis on the rule of law and collective leadership indicates an unambiguous sign by the younger generation of leaders of their willingness to depart from the rule of man (ren zhi).

Hu's "new deal" is by no means a mere PR effort, but is borne of deep concerns about widespread corruption, declining ethical standards, and political irresponsibility. Some of these problems are caused by a perceived "alliance" between the political, economic, and to a lesser degree, intellectual elite. The rule of law and democratic mechanisms are considered crucial for balancing the near monopolization of resources by this alliance, and is therefore crucial for the survival of the CCP and the stability of Chinese society.

### **Unleash the press**

Real and effective rule of law and democracy, though a desirable goal for many in China, may not come soon. Hu and his colleagues have thus turned to promoting a bigger "public space" with a freer media to check socio-political "evils."

Many Western observers were surprised when a theater version of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* started showing in Beijing on Nov. 15, 2002, one day before the closing of the CCP's 16th Party Congress. This "accident" was the beginning of a gradual but consistent effort of the new guard to liberalize the media and cultural "space."

Since early 2003, top Chinese leaders have urged the media not only to reflect the Party's line, but also the opinion of ordinary people. The official People's Daily newspaper insisted in February that China's media should practice the "three closeness": close to reality, close to the masses, and close to real life. Meanwhile, the government promises, in line

with WTO requirements, to grant foreign media more access to China's market.

Even the death penalty is being actively debated among China's legal experts, human rights scholars, and media outlets. In a conference early this year sponsored by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the consensus was to push toward the elimination of the inhuman practice in China in order to join the worldwide trend toward ending the death penalty.

### **A 'kinder and gentler' reformer**

Despite decades of steady economic growth, Hu's China has become one of the most inegalitarian nations in the world. The new leadership is determined to address this issue. Since late last year, Hu and others made several highly publicized trips to some of the poorest parts of China. In his New Year's speech, Hu stressed that the CCP should be modest, pragmatic, honest, hardworking, and really serve the people. Topping Hu's agenda is reducing the burden on farmers, promoting self-governance in rural areas, cutting bureaucracies at all levels, and granting legal and equal status for migrant workers in cities.

In mid-February, Hu went so far as to unveil his own "three people principles" (power for, sympathy with, and benefit for the people). Jiang Zemin's theory of "three represents" (meaning the CCP represents the most productive parts of Chinese society) remains part of Hu's vocabulary, but Hu's softer and gentler public policy provides an unambiguous contrast with Jiang's merit-based and market-driven elitist approach.

### **Foreign policy 'new thinking': be big and nice**

The extent to which these moderate and liberal domestic policies will affect China's foreign/defense outlook remains to be seen. The publication of China's third Defense White Paper in December 2002, however, does indicate a more moderate threat perception and strategic calculus regarding regional security and relations with other countries. One marked feature of the white paper is that it does not even mention nor strongly imply the United States and its foreign policy.

The thorny Taiwan issue is soft-peddled, even if the Pentagon continues to push for more military integration with Taiwan. Last November, Beijing even raised the prospect of developing normal and cooperative relations with NATO. Despite philosophical differences with the U.S. regarding Iraq, China has chosen to echo the French, German, and Russian initiatives rather than take the lead.

There is no question that Jiang's influence on China's defense and foreign policies will continue into the next few

years as the winds of war blow strong both far away (Iraq) and at China's door step (Korea). Hu has, as vice chairman of the Central Military Commission since 1999, been involved in the formulation of China's defense policy.

Meanwhile, China continues to construct the so-called rings of "political friendliness," "economic cooperation," and "military exchange" around its periphery. In 2002, Beijing and the ASEAN countries signed two landmark agreements on free trade and a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

The consensus among foreign-policy makers is that a low-profile, reactive, and cooperative foreign policy is conducive to China's long-term goals of peace, stability, and development. Like the Yao Ming phenomenon, a big, rising China can, and should, be nice to others in the brave new world of preemption.

### **Hu and the 'made in China' generation**

As Hu ascends, the world's most populous country is finally coming under the tutelage of the "boomers," just like the two former political-military powers of the Cold War. Unlike their American and Russian counterparts who have both encountered difficulties and crises and appear eager to secure their place in history with bold domestic and foreign policies, the fourth generation of Chinese leaders has demonstrated little charisma or desire to be great.

Indeed, the era of strong leaders ended when Deng Xiaoping passed in 1997. To a certain degree, China under the third generation of leaders seems to have done better without those movers and shakers of history. As the helm passes to a nameless fourth generation, it seems inevitable that the rise of China will go hand in hand with the invisibility of its leaders.

Aside from charisma, or the lack of it, a key feature of Hu's generation is their "indigenous" background. To a large extent, leaders from Mao and Deng's generation started their career with experience in the West. The outgoing generation of leaders is the last one that was "made in Russia" (or the Soviet Union, to be precise), though they were not necessarily pro-Russia. Their departure from China's political scene marks the end of a near-century old "Russian complex" in China.

This new generation of elite has been largely "indigenously" produced. They can neither sing "Moscow Night" in Russian nor converse fluently in English. Their minds have been largely shaped by the decades during which China has been reforming itself away from the Soviet model, but they are not necessarily embracing America's liberal democracy. In a sense, China under Hu's generation may well become more Chinese.

This fourth generation of leaders shares a political background and personal experiences that occurred against the backdrop of the traumatic Cultural Revolution. This may suggest that they would prefer a more open-ended, less ideological attitude toward both domestic and foreign policies. Less devoted to any "ism" and with greater technological/intellectual abilities to "fix" problems, Hu's generation may not produce great thinkers or statesman. Nor

will they make huge mistakes as did Mao. Their pragmatic and moderate opinions in international and domestic affairs does not mean that they will go to any length to compromise (such as letting Taiwan go). Their willingness to maintain and achieve peace and stability, however, should not be questioned.

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