



Succession, SARS, Summit Diplomacy, and Hu's Six Months in Power by Yu Bin

In the next two weeks, President Hu Jintao will travel to Russia, France, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia for state visits and summit meetings (Shanghai Cooperation Organization and G-8). The rest of the world will have a chance to size up the relatively unknown "paramount" leader, barely out of the shadow of succession and SARS.

When Hu's fourth generation of leaders debuted last November, China finally was in the hands of the boomers, as Putin was for Russia and Clinton/Bush for America. Unlike the eight-month "honeymoon" for both Putin and Bush before running into their respective real crises (Kursk sinking in August 2000 and Sept. 11 for Bush), Hu's six-months in office have been ridden with crises.

A month before China's 16th Party Congress last November, the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula was to unravel East Asia's delicate strategic stability. In March, when Hu took over the state presidency, SARS turned itself into a healthcare disaster, political earthquake, and an international embarrassment. All this has happened, ironically, in the midst of the smoothest power transition in the PRC's history.

Despite the magnitude of these crises, Hu's government has managed to somewhat cope with the foreign crisis while pushing hard to fight back the domestic one. None of the crises are over. Hu's team nonetheless seems to have gained more credibility and respect.

Hu took over the head of the Party's Foreign Affairs Small Leading Group in March after China's parliament annual session. In late April, China was able to persuade Washington and Pyongyang to join a trilateral talk in Beijing. Nothing fundamental has been resolved at this juncture of the 50th anniversary of the end of the Korean War. The talk itself, however, was a positive step toward soft-landing this inherently difficult and extremely dangerous crisis.

SARS proves a harder challenge. Never in the history of the PRC is so much at stake for so many in such a short period of time. When Hu's fourth generation was launched six months ago, the vast Asian nation had been one of the few places in the world free from large-scale terrorist activities or fear of terror. In reaction to the outbreak of SARS and the initial denial and deceit by governmental officials, Hu moved with decisiveness and diligence to mobilize the medical community, liberalize the press, punish irresponsible officials, and provide help for the needed. In a matter of a few weeks, Beijing, which is among the worst affected in China, is moving away from its virtual city image. Meanwhile, governments at different levels have become a lot more transparent, responsive, and effective than before.

The change of guard in China is not yet to complete at this point as Jiang still retains the position of the powerful chairman of the Central Military Commission. Despite this shadow, Hu's team quickly unveiled a "kinder and gentler" platform late last year with a series of actions to promote the rule of law and to liberalize the media. [Note: See the author's "Hu's Mini New Deal," PacNet Newsletter, No. 11, March 6, 2003, www.csis.org/pacfor/pac0311.htm .] It seems SARS really speeds up China's political reforms toward a more liberal and more humane, if not immediately more democratic, governance. In contrast, post-crises trends in Russia and the U.S. actually led to curtailing societal liberty and freedom.

Hu's foreign policy skills are yet to be fully tested. As part of the more indigenous generation of leaders - as against Deng's Westernized generation and Jiang's Russianized one, Hu will present himself and China at various international fora in the coming weeks. In Moscow, he will close the 2400-kilometer, \$2.9 billion oil pipeline deal and will try to revitalize the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. His presence at the G-8 in Paris, though as part of the North-South unofficial dialogue, will give Hu unique chances to be with the world's "axis of the rich and powerful." In both multilateral meetings, coordinating with other heads of states over the Korean crisis will be on the top agenda for Hu.

To be sure, SARS and the Korean nuclear crisis are far from over. In this "marry-without-children" Year of the Goat, millions of newly-wed couples in China are postponing having children. Despite the fanfare surrounding the Chinese New Year's Eve TV extravaganza that launched the Year of the Goat, common sense prescribes caution for and awareness of misfortunes and possible danger.

No matter how superstitious China's animal symbols may be for real life, 2003 so far is "bad" or unsettling enough for the rest of the world: the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster on the Chinese New Year's Day, the arrival of the era of preemption, general economic slowdown and deflation around the world, Korea nuclear crisis, and SARS. And we are barely half-way into the Year of the Goat.

For Hu's fourth generation of leaders, SARS may be hard to eliminate in the foreseeable future. Its potential impact on China's vast countryside remains unclear. Beyond Hu's China, Taiwan and the U.S. will soon log into presidential elections with uncertain impact on cross-Strait and cross-Pacific relations. As a legally "normal" state, Japan now, perhaps more than any time since the end of World War II, is willing and able to test its newfound freedom of action, including going nuclear. It remains to be seen if Hu's team will be able to turn these "crouching" challenges/dangers into "hidden," or real, opportunities.

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