

Leadership Transition in China

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Organizing Institution: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Bong Youngshik, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (moderator)
Kim Heungkyu, Sungshin Women's University
Soeya Yoshihide, Keio University
Wang Yiwei, Tongji University
Seo Jungmin, Yonsei University

Panel Short Summary

Huang Xiao, Ewha Womans University
Rebecca Graebner, The Heritage Foundation

In October 2012, the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress will come into power, ushering in the 5th generation of Chinese leadership. It is likely that both PRC Vice President, Xi Jinping, and Executive Vice-Premier, Li Keqiang, will remain on the committee. Some predict that Hu Jintao will remain the Chairman of the Central Military commission, while Xi could become the General Secretary of the CCP, and Li the Premier of the State Council. The recent Bo Xilai incident has complicated the already much over-specified leadership transition. The panelists elaborated on the modern social, economic, and political challenges faced by the transitioning leadership.

Kim Heungkyu emphasized the challenges within the CCP, specifically the diversity in experience and background within the leaders, and their ability to maintain harmony and unity. The Bo Xilai incident further highlighted factions within groups in the CCP, causing a rift within the princelings and driving apart coalitions between the princeling and Shanghai groups. Finding balance within will require members to compromise, negotiate, and take into account the institutional norms and rules. If the new leadership cannot reach consensus, the 18th Party Congress could be postponed.

Soeya Yoshihide argued that compared to the China of the Mao era, today's social, economic, and political spheres are currently experiencing tremendous evolution. A rising group of leaders with diverse roots will be challenged to continue Hu Jintao's "harmonious society," while attempting to maintain consensus within the government itself. Soeya

described leadership as fundamentally “messy,” where leaders have to “muddle” through the obstacles and issues in order to achieve balance and harmony. This is normal for all new leaders and governing groups, thus the CCP leadership transition will encounter the same difficulties and will have to adjust.

Wang Yiwei spoke of “layers of power” and how they have changed since modernization. The middle class makes up the modern power base, a departure from the traditional group composed of farmers and workers. Power distribution is correlated with wealth distribution, consistent with traditional models; however, institutional power has transferred from individual power to collective leadership. This evolution of the layers of power, as well as this being China’s first leadership transition without supreme leader appointments, points to another transition towards democracy within the CPC. Today’s generation will have to manage issues not faced by previous leaders due to an evolving political system.

Seo Jungmin argued that although this generation of leaders is more social science-oriented and is market-economy trained, a rapidly expanding economy will be a unique challenge requiring creative solutions. After 30 years of industrialization, there is now little room for further growth. Leadership must find alternative means to continue the double-digit economic expansion. In addition to a growing economy, leadership must also attempt to mitigate social challenges. Seo speaks of today’s politicians as facing “more complex slogans,” or promises, in order to satisfy the expanding diversity of groups within China. China’s population is made up of more than 20 million migrant workers, none of which hold citizenship. Addressing the needs of this large community is essential in order to prevent future social and labor issues. Reducing the gap between the rich and poor and those in urban and rural settings is vital in ensuring that destabilization does not occur.

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