

# The New Era in Chinese Elite Politics

SHIPING ZHENG



Analyzing elite politics in any country is no easy task. Given the secret nature of the Chinese political process, the challenge is especially daunting. A few years ago, Frederick Teiwes pointed out some major shortcomings in the study of Chinese elite politics, including how we often work with inadequate information from unreliable or suspect sources and with intuitive speculation, make assumptions about Chinese politics on the basis of Western culture, adopt official Chinese views, and follow American academic fashions.<sup>1</sup> Today we are working with relatively more, but still inadequate, information. Intuitive speculation remains unavoidable, though not always unproductive. For better or for worse, official Chinese interpretations have gained much more influence in the field. Some old assumptions have changed, but some new ones are being made, which are not always more culturally sensitive than the old ones. Finally, given the American lead in social science research in general and in China studies in particular, following the American academic fashions is hard to resist even for scholars and researchers outside American academics. Thus, despite obvious improvement in the field, understanding Chinese elite politics remains a difficult job.

This essay begins with an analysis of some personal characteristics of China's new ruling elite enthroned at the Sixteenth National Congress of

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick C. Teiwes, "A Critique of Western Studies of CCP Elite Politics," *International Institute for Asian Studies (the Netherlands) Newsletter* 9 (Summer 1996).



the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2002. It then suggests that China's top leaders are now working in changed political and organizational environment where there is no more strongman or intense ideological struggles and where retirement has become an acceptable way of political exit and real power depends on both personal abilities and official positions. This essay further argues that age limits have now become an important factor in shaping the behavior of Chinese elite while the Chinese military no longer plays the role of king-making behind the scenes. Finally, this essay suggests that the nature of Chinese elite politics may be better understood in terms of power shift among unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity.

### **China's New Ruling Elite After the Sixteenth Party Congress**

We may begin with the assumption that the new leaders who have come to power since the CCP's Sixteenth National Congress are a group of rational actors who are trying to maximize their self-interest—or at least minimize the danger to the security of themselves and family members. This of course does not mean that Chinese leaders are wise men all the time, but until proven to be acting irrationally, desperately, or politically unwisely, we should presume them to be rational. If Chinese leaders decide to take bold initiatives, we can reasonably assume that they must have made up their mind to invest their political capital. If they intend to test the limits, they must have calculated the risks. On the other hand, if they choose to assume a low profile, they must have good reasons, too.

Second, in politics no success seems to be possible without patronage. China is no exception. Thus all the top Chinese leaders today can attribute their success either directly or indirectly to one or more patrons: Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) to Song Ping (宋平)/Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平); Wu Bangguo (吳邦國) to Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基); Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) to Zhu Rongji; Jia Qinglin (賈慶林) to Jiang Zemin (江澤民); Zeng Qinghong (曾慶紅) to Jiang Zemin; Huang Ju (黃菊) to Jiang Zemin; Wu Guanzheng (吳官正) to Wei Jianxing (尉健行)/Qiao Shi (喬石); Li Changchun (李長

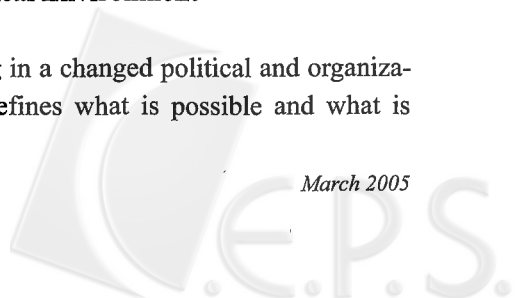
春) to Jiang Zemin; and Luo Gan (羅幹) to Li Peng (李鵬). China's top leaders are not puppets of their patrons, however, but independent agents themselves. They are not merely the products of the political process but are themselves key players in the game of politics that ultimately affects their own power and fortunes.

Third, these top leaders possess an interesting combination of qualities as technocrats and party bureaucrats—two professions that usually do not mix very well. Education in engineering teaches one to be pragmatic and cautious and to look for certainty and workable solutions. Chinese leaders have, however, worked for many years in the CCP organizational and institutional environment to arrive at where they are today; being able to survive and move up the ladder of power means that they have almost certainly developed the necessary politicking skills and should have become accustomed to ambiguities and uncertainties.

Six of the nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Sixteenth Central Committee have had extensive work experience as provincial chiefs: Wu Bangguo and Huang Ju in Shanghai (上海); Jia Qinglin in both Fujian (福建) and Beijing (北京); Wu Guanzheng in Wuhan (武漢), Jiangxi (江西), and Shandong (山東); Li Changchun in Liaoning (遼寧), Henan (河南), and Guangdong (廣東); and Luo Gan in Henan. Hu Jintao and Zeng Qinghong have also drawn support from provincial power bases (the northwest of China for Hu and Shanghai for Zeng). Among the other fifteen members of the Politburo, ten are either currently provincial chiefs or have worked extensively in the provinces. One can therefore speculate as to whether provincial power base is more meaningful than other factors (professional training, career path, party organizational experience, etc.) in explaining the political behavior of Chinese top leaders, although one may never succeed in establishing the link empirically.

### **A Changed Political Environment**

China's top leaders are working in a changed political and organizational environment that generally defines what is possible and what is



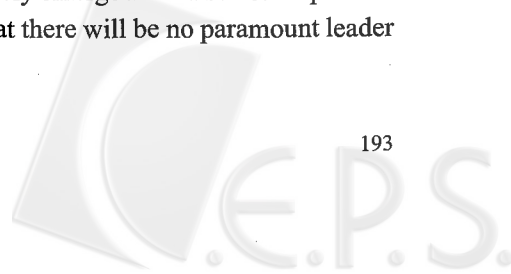
risky. Below I outline several of the changes that we can reasonably assume to be the conditioning factors in shaping elite political behavior in today's China.

### *No More Strongman*

Strongman like Mao Zedong (毛澤東) and Deng were the products of many years of hard battles, both politically and militarily. Born in the 1940s or the 1950s, too late for the revolution or wars, the so-called "fourth generation" of leaders are inevitably "softer" than the war-hardened "Long Marchers." Moreover, given the profound socioeconomic changes in the recent decades, it is no longer possible for Hu Jintao, or anyone else for that matter, to become a strongman even if one so desired. Hu's predecessor, Jiang Zemin, has been trying to imitate Deng and Mao, without much success. Hu Jintao, on the other hand, seems to be too politically cautious to attempt to strive to the status of his predecessors. It is even tempting to ask whether any of the nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee has what it takes to be a strongman or a paramount leader.

A strongman or paramount leader like Mao (and, to a lesser degree, Deng) was able to dictate the policy agenda, prevail over his senior colleagues, rule over the objection of the majority of provincial leaders, and launch sudden, surprising, and dramatic personal initiatives. China's new leaders may be firm and capable, but for good or for ill, no one can even get close to matching Mao or Deng in dictating the policymaking process or launching personal initiatives.

Paramount leaders like Mao and Deng were able to pick and choose or remove/replace their "successors" easily and frequently, making political succession in China highly personal and unpredictable. Jiang Zemin is said to have complained about being deprived of his chance to choose his successor. Hu Jintao is not likely to get his chance, either. In the area of political succession, formal and institutionalized political processes have not filled the vacuum left by the decline of informal and personal processes. China's top leaders in the future will likely emerge from a selection process yet to be defined. What is certain is that there will be no paramount leader to hand-pick a successor.



*The End of Intense Ideological Struggle*

With the end of strongman politics, there has also been the subsequent disappearance of the intense ideological battles that often characterized the Mao years or even the early years of the Deng regime. If "politics in command" was the trademark of the Mao years and "economics in command" was the trademark of the Deng or Jiang years, the current leadership of Hu Jintao is mostly likely to be viewed as "crisis-management in command." Having been trained as engineers and having worked many years as party bureaucrats, Hu Jintao and his colleagues are inherently ill-prepared to handle ideological and theoretical matters. Moreover, faced with the problems of rampant corruption, rising unemployment, widening societal and regional income gaps, and social unrest, they cannot afford to waste time, energy, or political capital in engaging in ideological and theoretical debates that neither resolve nor help to manage actual and potential governing crises.

Does the end of ideology help to formalize and institutionalize elite political process, or does it instead increase the role played by informal and factional politics? Years ago, Lucian Pye argued that the latter was the case.<sup>2</sup> In their attempts to revise and revive the factionalist paradigm, Lowell Dittmer and Yu-Shan Wu (吳玉山) also argued that factions remain the building blocks of Chinese informal politics—even as post-Mao politics becomes more routinized and economic reform becomes more firmly entrenched as the prime policy emphasis.<sup>3</sup> Their arguments notwithstanding, one operational problem with informal politics/factionalism model is that it is difficult to establish the empirical or logical link between the informal/factional and the formal/institutional dimensions of the political process. We generally know or believe who the political patrons are for today's top leaders in China. Based on their educational background, career paths, bureaucratic profiles, regional connections, or policy prefer-

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<sup>2</sup>Lucian W. Pye, "Factions and the Politics of *Guangxi*: Paradoxes in Chinese Administrative and Political Behaviour," *The China Journal*, no. 34 (July 1995): 52.

<sup>3</sup>Lowell Dittmer and Yu-Shan Wu, "The Modernization of Factionalism in Chinese Politics," *World Politics* 47 (July 1995): 493.



ences, we may also identify Chinese leaders as members of such factions as "the Shanghai Gang," "the Qinghua Faction," "the Youth League Faction," etc. Beyond that, however, what occurs behind the scenes or how these political factions interact informally is often impossible to know for any certainty.

### *Retirement as Political Exit*

During the Mao years, purges or death were the two most likely routes of political exit. Indeed, under the worst circumstances even natural death did not spell an exit from politics because targeted victims were still condemned long after they were dead. Today, the CCP and government officials at lower levels may withdraw from politics by quitting their jobs, either to join private business or to work in non-government organizations. Senior leaders cannot easily choose to quit; for them, retirement constitutes a legitimate, honorable, and comfortable way of political exit. Political retirement has now become so much institutionalized that it really means that the retirees need not be bothered. Indeed, the relative low public profile of a dozen retired elders—including recently retired former Politburo Standing Committee members, Li Peng, Zhu Rongji, Li Ruihuan (李瑞環), Wei Jianxing, and Li Lanqing (李嵐清)—has prompted one observer to ask, "Where Have All the Elders Gone?"<sup>4</sup>

### *"Power = Ability + Position"*

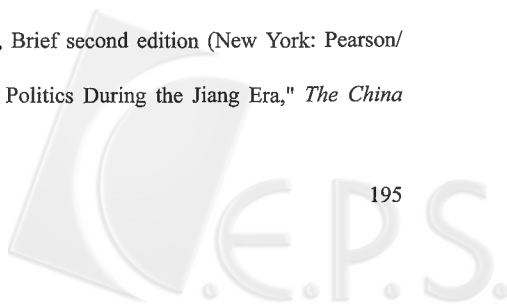
If power is "the ability of **A** to get **B** to do something **B** otherwise will not do" or "the ability of **A** to prevent **B** from doing something **B** otherwise would like to do," then the sources of power have been changing in China.<sup>5</sup> For leaders like Mao and Deng, power is defined in historical and qualitative terms, such as war credential, prestige, and status.<sup>6</sup> Because their

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<sup>4</sup>H. Lyman Miller, "Where Have All the Elders Gone?" *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 10 (Spring 2004).

<sup>5</sup>Joshua S. Goldstein, *International Relations*, Brief second edition (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005), 46.

<sup>6</sup>David Shambaugh, "The Dynamics of Elite Politics During the Jiang Era," *The China Journal*, no. 45 (February 2001): 109.



leadership ability had been time-tested, having one more or one less official position makes no meaningful difference in their overall political power. The track record of younger leaders, however, is comparatively new and short. Their unproven leadership quality can only be compensated by the quantity—taking up more positions and assuming more responsibilities. Although official position without leadership ability can mean little power, leadership ability without official position means no power. This may explain why being promoted from alternate member of the Politburo to full member of the Politburo Standing Committee has given Zeng Qinghong much more power, whereas the similar promotion means much less for Jia Qinglin, Huang Ju, or Li Changchun. This may also explain why the once powerful leaders like Qiao Shi, Li Peng, and Zhu Rongji quickly fell to the political sidelines after retiring from their official positions. Finally, one may also ponder whether this was one of the reasons that Jiang Zemin needed to hold onto his Central Military Commission (CMC) chairmanship for as long as politically and physically possible.

### "The Clock is Ticking"

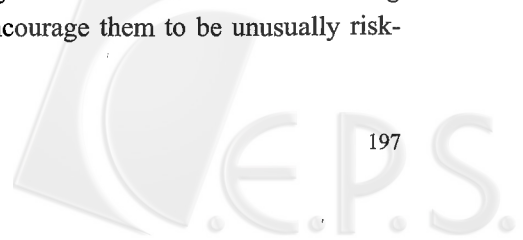
A fascinating but untraditional trend in Chinese elite politics is that China's rulers are getting younger and younger. For instance, the average age of the members of the Sixteenth Central Committee in 2002 was 55.4 years. The average age of the twenty-four Politburo members of the Sixteenth Central Committee was 61 years, about four years younger than that of the Politburo members of the Fifteenth Central Committee in 1997. The average age of the nine members in the new Politburo Standing Committee was 62 years in 2002, about three years younger than that of the members of the Politburo Standing Committee formed in 1997.

This general trend began with Deng Xiaoping's push in the 1980s for official retirement for older cadres and the promotion of younger leaders. Institutionalization of the official retirement age in recent years has made age limits a significant factor in elite politics. Since 1992, the retirement age has been set at 65 for central ministers, provincial governors, and com-

manders of military regions. The official retirement age has been set at 70 for China's top leaders—including the General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee, members of the Politburo, the State President and Vice President, and Premier and Vice Premiers of the State Council. The collective retirement of the six senior leaders around the age of 70 at the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002 has helped to consolidate this mandatory retirement rule.

Age limits can be expected to have a profound impact on the behavior of Chinese elite. For officials at the level of central minister/provincial governor, upon approaching the official retirement age, one has to assess his or her chance of "going up" (i.e., being promoted) or "going out" (i.e., being retired). Because the power structure is shaped like a pyramid, opportunities for "going up" are always limited. One would normally expect a more competitive jockeying for top positions, except that the official age limits now automatically disqualify many ambitious individuals, blocking them from even entering the political game.

For instance, most of the nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Sixteenth Central Committee are first-timers, but they can be expected to serve only one term due to the age limit rule. By the time the next CCP National Congress convenes in 2007, six of the nine Politburo Standing Committee members will either reach or be close to their retirement age, including Luo Gan (born in 1935), Huang Ju (born in 1938), Wu Guanzheng (born in 1938), Zeng Qinghong (born in 1939), Jia Qinglin (born in 1940), and Wu Bangguo (born in 1941). Only Hu Jintao (born in 1942), Wen Jiabao (born in 1942), and Li Changchun (born in 1944) are qualified to serve one more term in the Seventeenth Central Committee. At this age game the Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao team can beat anybody. However, even if Hu and Wen can afford to be more patient than others, an expected tenure of two terms gives the Hu/Wen team only ten years. Given the fact that the biological clock is ticking regardless of politics, what can we expect these nine top leaders to accomplish? Does the realization of the age limit give them a sense of urgency or one more reason for "muddling through"? Does the ticking clock encourage them to be unusually risk-prone or risk-averse?





Undoubtedly, there is an exception to every rule and any rule may be twisted. Jiang Zemin's refusal to retire at the age of 76 from the CMC chairmanship at the Sixteenth Congress in 2002 is a perfect example. To challenge the official age limit is an uphill battle, however, inviting controversy and resistance. In the end, victory, if any, is defined only in quantity (years in office), not in quality (political influence or prestige). At the Fourth Plenum of the CCP's Sixteenth Central Committee in September 2004, Jiang ultimately relinquished his position as the CMC Chairman. After two years of controversy and struggle, it is hard to believe that anyone would think that Jiang is better-off today than he was two years ago if he had relinquished the CMC chairmanship at the Sixteenth Party Congress.

### **Is the Military Out of the Picture?**

Chinese elite politics during the Mao years was marked by the heavy involvement of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Military intervention in politics during the Deng years was much less frequent, but the CCP Leadership's mishandling of the crisis in Tiananmen Square (天安門廣場) in May-June 1989 again brought the military into elite power struggle. Is the military out of the picture for now? If so, will the military continue to refrain from intervening in Chinese elite politics?

I would like to suggest that any "political kidnapping" of civilian leaders by the military, similar to what happened to the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990, is highly unlikely to occur in China. First, given the complex internal system of controls, checks, and monitoring in the PLA, coup attempts by individual military leaders are not only difficult to plan, but stand little chance of success. Senior military leaders in China may challenge the policies of the civilian leadership or lodge complaints about any individual leader, but will unlikely play a major role in shaping future political succession or personnel changes of the civilian leadership. Equally unlikely is that the CMC as a powerful institution can be manipulated to supersede the CCP Politburo and its Standing Committee.

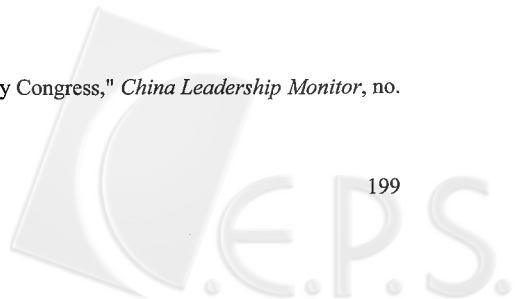
Institutionally, the mutually beneficial and dependent relationship between the civilian and military leadership makes it politically unnecessary for the PLA to seize power from the CCP regime. Whereas the percentages of military representatives in the CCP Central Committee varied greatly during the Mao or the Deng era, the level has stabilized to about 20-22 percent of the full membership in the Central Committee. This means that forty-four full seats in the Sixteenth Central Committee are distributed to leaders representing all major PLA units, including the service arms and military regions. As usual, the name list of the military representatives on the Sixteenth Central Committee reads like a "Who's Who" of the PLA. If separating the PLA from the CCP is still politically impossible, then institutionalizing the military presence in the CCP Central Committee leads to a managed political role by the military. What has emerged is a negotiated partnership of "give-and-take" between the civilian leaders and the PLA generals.

Meanwhile, at the highest level of decision-making, formal and informal channels of political influence for the military have been minimized.<sup>7</sup> Since Liu Huaqing's (劉華清) retirement from the Politburo Standing Committee in 1997, there has been no military representative in the CCP Politburo Standing Committee. Both the Fifteenth and Sixteenth CCP Central Committees have affirmed the rule that top military brass will not be part of the Politburo Standing Committee. The military representation in the Politburo is set at one-tenth of the total full membership—for a total of two seats which are held by the two most senior military leaders, the Vice Chairmen of the CMC. Informal and indirect channels of interaction notwithstanding, the PLA's formal access to China's highest level of decision-making now boils down to two members in the Politburo.

After the CCP's Sixteenth National Congress, when Jiang Zemin would finally hand over the CMC chairmanship to Hu Jintao became the greatest source of anxiety and political uncertainty. When Jiang, as the

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<sup>7</sup>James Mulvenon, "The PLA and the 16th Party Congress," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 5 (Winter 2003).



CMC Chairman, presided over the ceremony of promoting fifteen PLA and Armed Police officers to the rank of general (the highest military rank in China)<sup>8</sup> in June 2004, only three months before the Fourth Plenum, speculation again emerged about whether Jiang Zemin intended to serve another full term as the CMC Chairman until the CCP's Seventeenth National Congress in 2007. People then had good reasons to be worried because Jiang's delayed handover of the CMC chairmanship or any other unwise political maneuver would undoubtedly complicate China's military command system and would make it difficult for Hu Jintao to establish himself as the new commander-in-chief. Three months later, many were surprised again to see how easy the handover of the CMC chairmanship was from Jiang to Hu. The smooth end of this high-suspense political drama only confirms the belief that the military role in Chinese elite politics has already been institutionalized to the point that the PLA no longer plays the role of king-maker behind the scenes.

### Is China's Political World Becoming Bipolar or Multipolar?

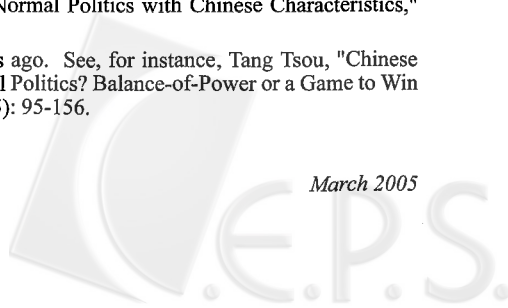
Over the decades, the study of Chinese elite politics has generated many models, including the "Mao-in-command," "two-line struggle," "factionalism," "bureaucratic politics," "corporatism," "new institutionalism," "win-it-all," and "normal politics" models. Some positive debate over these different research approaches has also emerged.<sup>9</sup> Useful now would be to test the relevance of the analytical framework of international relations to the study of Chinese elite politics.<sup>10</sup> For example, the nature of

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<sup>8</sup>This includes Jiang Zemin's protégé, You Xigui (由喜貴), Director of the Central Bodyguards Bureau (中央警衛局局長).

<sup>9</sup>For the debate between the "win-it-all" and "normal politics" models, for instance, see Joseph Fewsmith, "The New Shape of Elite Politics," *The China Journal*, no. 45 (January 2001): 83-93; and Frederick C. Teiwes, "Normal Politics with Chinese Characteristics," *ibid.*, 69-82.

<sup>10</sup>Tang Tsou pioneered this experiment years ago. See, for instance, Tang Tsou, "Chinese Politics at the Top: Factionalism or Informal Politics? Balance-of-Power or a Game to Win All?" *The China Journal*, no. 34 (July 1995): 95-156.



Chinese elite politics could be understood in terms of power shift among unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity.

First, in a unipolar world the strongman or the paramount leader acts like a hegemon. He demands and commands unquestionable loyalty and dominates the policymaking process. The hegemon makes policies as he wishes and therefore has no incentive for institutionalization of the elite political processes, including political succession. Any established procedures and rules can be easily ignored or abolished if they stand in the way. As the ultimate center of power, the hegemon can be the greatest source of either regime stability or political chaos. Second, a bipolar image of the Chinese elite political world would suggest the emergence or existence of basically two power centers led by two top leaders, with the remainder of the ruling elite either being closely associated or bandwagoning with one of the top leaders. In a bipolar elite political world, the two competing groups or leaders will either risk a win-or-lose confrontation or try to set up some rules of the game so as to stabilize the process of interaction. Third and finally, there is the world of multipolarity in which balancing is the name of the game being played by several more-or-less equally powerful elite groups.

We can now apply these models to contemporary Chinese politics. Elite politics during the Mao years certainly resembled the unipolar world, while such politics during the Deng years seemed to move toward bipolarity. Note, however, that it was Deng, as the paramount leader, who settled the political crisis in Tiananmen in 1989. Chinese elite politics during the Jiang Zemin years makes a much better case for a bipolar argument. Here the two more-or-less equally powerful groups—led by Jiang Zemin on the one hand, and Li Peng, on the other—adopted a philosophy of "live-and-let-live," at the urging of Deng Xiaoping, for the sake of regime stability.

The question today is whether Chinese elite politics is bipolar or multipolar in nature. Is the relationship between Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao akin to that which existed between Mao and Liu Shaoqi (劉少奇), Mao and Lin Biao (林彪), or Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun (陳雲)? Is there evidence to suggest that two power groupings have emerged, one led by the Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao team and the other by Zeng Qinghong? If so,



are the two competing power groups working toward institutionalizing the process of elite interaction, or are they risking a game of "win-it-all" first articulated by Tang Tsou (鄒謙) and Joseph Fewsmith?

Alternatively, is it more accurate to perceive Chinese elite politics as moving toward a multipolar world? Here political power is decentralized, fragmented, and diversified in several key party and state institutions, between the political and economic spheres, and among various regions. In this political world, some power groups and leaders carry more weight than others, but no one power group or leader can easily prevail over others. To prevent one group from becoming predominant, several competing power groups, whether institutionally or regionally based, may be forced to work out some kind of rules and norms that can serve as a "collective security" mechanism. If this multipolar state becomes the reality, the General Secretary of the CCP may look and act like the Secretary-General of the United Nations, mainly serving as "a referee of competing constituencies and interests mediated through increasingly institutionalized processes."<sup>11</sup> The danger in a multipolar world, however, is that power may become fragmented to the point where no collective security exists.

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<sup>11</sup> As H. Lyman Miller suggests, the "only concrete formal powers the party constitution gives the general secretary are to convene meetings of the Politburo and its Standing Committee and to preside over the work of the party Secretariat." See H. Lyman Miller, "The Succession of Hu Jintao," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 1, Part 2 (Winter 2002): 7.

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