



Economist.com

WORLD  
ASIA

## China

### The mysterious Mr Hu

Oct 18th 2007

From The Economist print edition

#### Less bellicose than his predecessor, but no more democratic

##### [Get article background](#)

HE HAD been China's Communist Party chief for five years and state president for four, but it was not until October 15th that Hu Jintao made his first televised address explaining what his policies were. Mr Hu suggested ways China could become more democratic and less corrupt. He called for peace with Taiwan. But Mr Hu showed no zeal for bold reform.

The occasion for Mr Hu's speech was the start of a week-long party congress in Beijing, shortly after which big changes in the top leadership will be announced. But Mr Hu is no more a strongman than he is a visionary. The new line-up is likely to be a compromise between rival factions that leaves the succession uncertain.

When Mr Hu took over as party chief just after the last congress in 2002, optimists speculated that he might prove bolder than the previous paramount leaders, Jiang Zemin and Deng Xiaoping, in pushing for political reform. After Mr Hu's 2½-hour speech, China's state-owned news agency noted that he had used the word democracy more than 60 times. But Mr Jiang mentioned the word almost as often in 2002. Politically, little has changed.

Mr Hu's speech offered scant hope that it would in the next five years either. He spoke of the need for more transparency and greater public participation. But he offered few concrete suggestions for achieving this, such as strengthening China's largely ceremonial legislature. Nor, it seems, will he shed more light on his own doings. (He has yet to hold a proper news conference.) Mr Hu called for more democracy inside the party itself, including a system whereby local party committees would vote on important issues and personnel appointments. Voting, however, is time-honoured party practice. It has mastered the art of rigging.

Democrats in Hong Kong were not inspired. Mr Hu made no mention of their demands for (and China's neglected promise of) a chief executive and legislature chosen by universal suffrage. Hong Kong's present chief executive, Donald Tsang, caused a furore this month by saying that democracy, taken to "the extreme", could result in something like the Cultural Revolution in China in the 1960s and 70s. It is an argument often made by Chinese officials to deter demands for democracy. Mr Tsang, however, was forced to apologise for his remarks the next day.

Despite China's deep misgivings about democracy in Taiwan, Mr Hu surprised some observers by striking a relatively conciliatory note on the island, which China regards as its own. China is alarmed at plans by Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-bian, to hold a referendum seeking support for Taiwan's doomed attempt to join the United Nations as "Taiwan" rather than "the Republic of China", the name under which it lost its UN seat in 1971.

Both China and America have described the vote as a step towards a declaration of independence by Taiwan, an act that China has said would trigger war. But Mr Hu, unlike Mr Jiang in 2002, made no mention of the use of force. He repeated an offer for a peace agreement with Taiwan, if it accepts the idea of "one China". He also failed to repeat Mr Jiang's warning that "the Taiwan question must not be allowed to drag on indefinitely". Mr Hu seems more content than was his predecessor to ignore Taiwan, as long as it does not explicitly renounce its notional links with the mainland.

In the build-up to the Olympic games next August, Mr Hu is anxious to avoid confrontation abroad. He made ritual mention of "hegemonism", party-speak for American dominance, a couple of times in his speech. But he said progress towards a "multipolar world" was irreversible. This implies China is now more confident that its rise as a global power

Reuters



Things looking up for Tibet?

will not be blocked by America.

Mr Hu would not have surprised his audience of more than 2,200 delegates had he sounded tougher on the Americans. Chinese officials have been seething over Congress's decision to award a Gold Medal of Honour to the Dalai Lama, and President Bush's decision to attend the ceremony on October 17th. This was the highest-profile meeting between an American president and the exiled Tibetan leader. China responded by pulling out of talks involving America and others due to be held in Berlin this week over the nuclear crisis in Iran. American officials expect China's pique to be short-lived, however. Mr Hu is delighted that Mr Bush will attend the opening of next year's Olympics.

Despite intense jockeying for power in the build-up to the party congress, no sign has emerged of any serious policy differences between the two men tipped to emerge as the top contenders for Mr Hu's job in 2012. Both Xi Jinping, the party chief of Shanghai, and his counterpart from Liaoning Province, Li Keqiang, have been dutifully parroting Mr Hu's line.

Perhaps with the top party job in mind, Mr Xi, 54, has gone to unusual lengths to make his agenda known. Earlier this year the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published a six-volume work describing reforms in Zhejiang, a relatively prosperous coastal province, where Mr Xi was party chief for five years before taking up his post in Shanghai in March.

In the volume on political reforms, the authors note that Zhejiang's wealth has produced growing demands for political participation. This "increasing democratic consciousness", they say, calls for new trails to be blazed in political reform. Mr Xi, claims the book, has obliged. It gives details of recent experiments with grassroots democracy in Zhejiang, from public discussions of local policies to village referendums. It suggests that local governments at all levels should carry out such trials. Never mind if some turn out to violate central policy, the provincial leadership can always put a stop to them.

But multiparty democracy is no more on Mr Xi's mind than it is on Mr Hu's. The books describe Zhejiang's vigorous efforts to develop party cells in private enterprises and recruit private-business owners (19,682 of them were members by the end of 2005). Even in a booming region like Zhejiang, where non state-owned enterprises produced 65% of GDP by the middle of the decade, the party's grip on power remains "as solid as a rock", the authors proclaim. If so, Mr Xi has a bright future.

Copyright © 2007 The Economist Newspaper and The Economist Group. All rights reserved.