China Needs a Wise Strongman



Chinese President Xi Jinping

Chinese President Xi Jinping, who already wears many hats, acquired his ninth last month as chair of a reform-oriented military taskforce. He was promptly nicknamed Jiu Ba Dao, or "Nine Knives", the pen name of a popular Taiwanese author-director.

Xi wears some unusually big number of hats: State President, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) chief, Central Military Commission (CMC) chairman, and head of at least six high-level committees looking into such areas as cyber security, national security and foreign policy.

The analysts also cite unprecedented moves that Xi has made to show how much stronger he is compared to his predecessors Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin.

The war against corruption that Xi waged soon after he took power in November 2012 breaks an unwritten rule in that it also targets very high-level CCP members, such as the retired Zhou Yongkang of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). And a similar campaign in the military appears to have retired CMC vice-chairman Xu Caihou in its sights.

Then, there is a seeming revival of Mao Zedong-era practices. Earlier this month, 18 senior generals declared their backing for Xi in a collective show of support not seen in over three decades.

But analysts who disagree believe that Xi's ability to gather power stems more from a collective will by the current leadership team to find ways to overcome vested interest groups and push through much-needed reforms.

Failure to reach consensus on major matters among the apex PSC and retired political elite is often cited as a factor for the lack of meaningful political and economic reforms during the 10-year rule of president Hu Jintao and his premier Wen Jiabao.

Professor Alice Miller of the Hoover Institution, in a paper last month on how strong Xi is, argued "that the continuity in stress on collective leadership in Chinese state media treatment of the leadership from the Hu period into the Xi era underscores this conclusion".

"Rather than reflecting a campaign of personal aggrandisement and power-mongering by the new top leader, the leadership trends since the 18th CCP Congress suggest instead a leadership collective around Xi that enjoys a mandate for a concerted push at new reform after the frustrations of the later Hu years," she wrote.

"But this does not make Xi a strongman. He is essentially the first among equals - though an assertive and powerful one.

"If he were a strongman he would have had his way with Zhou Yongkang. He has not managed to do that."

However, after what has been deemed a disappointing Hu-Wen decade, there may well be a strong case for China to have a strongman now, albeit one who uses his powers wisely.

Also, the CCP, beset by rampant graft, could do with a strong, charismatic leader who can improve the party's image and rally people and cadres behind it.

But this would require changing the leadership structure - one that rules by consensus on major matters and is balanced by various factions - that Deng put in place precisely to prevent the rise of another Mao and the onset of another catastrophe such as the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution.

Of course, Xi will need to tread carefully. Jiang, 87, remains a formidable force behind the scenes and Hu's Communist Youth League proteges, particularly Guangdong party boss Hu Chunhua, are set to dominate the next PSC.

Still, a stronger CCP chief in Xi has produced welcomed changes: less emphasis on the pursuit of rapid economic growth and a stronger focus on tackling perennial problems like income inequality and environmental pollution.

But even as his power grows, President Xi should be mindful of how he wields his "Nine Knives." After all, a knife can cut both ways.

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