

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## What China's Leadership Turmoil Means for the United States

*Dean Cheng*

While most sessions of China's National People's Congress (NPC) have been little-noticed affairs, the same will not be said of the 2012 session. As this year's session came to a close, outgoing Premier Wen Jiabao warned of the potential for chaos and cited the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. A day later, Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai, who had missed at least one session of the NPC, was ousted from his position.

The turmoil in China's political succession should temper expectations for the U.S.–China relationship and lessen the leverage the Administration has allowed the Chinese by virtue of its extensive schedule of bilateral consultations. The story surrounding Bo's downfall is also an opportunity for the Administration to examine its policy on Chinese defectors so as to be prepared when it is presented

with access to high-level sources of intelligence.

### **The Ousted Leader.**

Bo was a “princeling,” referring to the privileged children of senior civilian and military leaders. His father was Bo Yibo, one of the core group of leaders that, with Mao Zedong, created the People's Republic of China. After an extended period in Liaoning province, he eventually became Party Secretary of Chongqing, one of the five centrally administered cities of China (the equivalent of a province).<sup>1</sup> During his five years in that position, Bo soon became one of the most prominent provincial-level leaders.

Bo's rise was in large part because he seemed to pay attention to public concerns. Bo gained significant notoriety for his anti-corruption campaigns, which not only broke up various gangs, but also addressed an issue that has steadily degraded popular confidence in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Similarly, he pushed public housing in response to growing public unhappiness with real estate speculation and skyrocketing housing prices.

One aspect of Bo's populism that gained significant Western attention was his apparent interest in reviving

ideological campaigns. Bo reputedly sought to foster “red culture” by promoting Maoist quotes and television programs that invoked Mao-era programming. At the same time, exploiting advances in social media, Bo's administration also sent “red text messages” to Chongqing's cell phone users.<sup>2</sup> Public service announcements on Chongqing television reflect a similar tone, combining exhortations for the Party and populace to identify with each other with a slick format and impressive production values.

Whether Bo was actually ideologically driven, however, is uncertain. He was clearly ambitious, and there are reports that he was actively campaigning for a position on the CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). The nine members of the PSC, led by the Party General Secretary (currently Hu Jintao), are the core leadership of China, much more so than the government offices of Premier and State Councilor. Such reports, if accurate, would be unprecedented in recent memory, as the selection of PSC members is generally done behind closed doors. It is possible that Bo sought to leverage his populism to gain access to the PSC, implying a popular backlash if he were denied one.

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**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

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Bo's position suffered a crippling blow in February, however, when his former police chief and lead anti-corruption enforcer, Wang Lijun, apparently sought to defect at the U.S. consulate in Chengdu. Precisely what happened remains unknown, but Wang left and was promptly seized by security agents. If Wang, a longtime associate of Bo's dating back to his Liaoning days, was trying to defect, it would have seriously undermined Bo's credibility and was a likely factor in his subsequent downfall.

### Implications.

Such major developments—occurring in the midst of one of China's most public political events—suggest that Chinese politics are in major turmoil. China is in the middle of a major political transition as Party General Secretary and President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, and other senior Chinese leaders step aside, yet who will comprise the next PSC remains unclear. As this is the first transition without the guiding hand of a revolutionary-era leader (i.e., Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping), such uncertainty may reflect infighting and issues of credibility and legitimacy within the Chinese leadership system.

With so much uncertainty, Bo may well have calculated that he had an opportunity to insert himself into the top leadership circles, but his efforts at populism, especially by invoking Mao, almost certainly ran afoul of China's consensus-based leadership system. Traumatized by such ill-conceived schemes as the

Great Leap Forward (1957–1960), which led to one of the worst famines of the 20th century, and the Cultural Revolution, China's political system has since pushed group leadership and tended to shun the worst aspects of cults of personality.

This is *not* to suggest, however, that China is on the verge of democratic reforms. Instead, there may be no prospects for any significant reforms, political or economic. Given the apparent uncertainties in the political succession process, proposing change before the August Beidaihe conference (when the new leadership is expected to be finalized) or even the fall Party Congress (when the power transition formally occurs) would be politically dangerous for key Chinese stakeholders.

### U.S. Policies Need a Careful Eye.

In light of this evolving situation, American policymakers should:

**Expect no major policy initiatives in the coming months.** The political instability that seems to be roiling China suggests there is neither interest in undertaking major policy initiatives nor capacity to do so. In the past, what former State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary Randy Schriver has called “the tyranny of the calendar” has effectively restrained the U.S. in areas such as arms sales to Taiwan, with impending meetings trumping certain policy decisions. At a time when bilateral meetings will simply be a matter of marking time in the relationship, the Administration

should not refrain from decisions in the U.S. national interest in favor of sustaining those meetings.

**Develop additional China expertise.** Lost in the debates about defense spending cuts is the importance of intelligence gathering and analysis. The U.S.–China relationship is far more complex than the U.S.–Soviet relationship of the Cold War, encompassing not only military, but also economic interactions. Consequently, there is a greater need for China expertise. Balancing the budget cannot come at the expense of intelligence capabilities and analysis; indeed, there is a clear need for more language-capable analysts. Rather than relying on the Chinese-funded Confucius Institutes cropping up at various U.S. universities, it should be the U.S. government that is sponsoring Chinese studies.

**Reexamine U.S. policies regarding defectors.** When Wang Lijun sought to defect to the United States, he reportedly was not granted asylum because it would have made Vice President Xi Jinping's visit awkward.<sup>3</sup> If this is in fact the case, it was a terrible, shortsighted decision, for Wang offered an enormous potential wealth of information. Wang would have had a thorough understanding of how the various security agencies, including the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of State Security, and parts of the Chinese armed forces, interact—information which is notoriously hard to obtain. And Wang could have provided significant insights into not only Bo, but also other potential

1. The other centrally administered cities are Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.

2. Malcolm Moore, “China Launches ‘Red Twitter,’” *Daily Telegraph*, December 15, 2010, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/8203593/China-launches-Red-Twitter.html> (March 16, 2012).

3. Ian Johnson and Jonathan Ansfield, “Scandal May Topple Party Official in China,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2012, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/17/world/asia/scandal-may-end-rise-of-bo-xilai-party-official-in-china.html?pagewanted=1&r=2> (March 16, 2012).

members of the incoming PSC. There should be an investigation of exactly what happened after Wang entered the U.S. consulate, and steps should be taken to ensure that the admission or rejection of such people is based on a broad concept of national interest and not narrow political considerations.

—*Dean Cheng is Research Fellow in Chinese Political and Security Affairs in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*