Hu Jintao Era:

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) witnessed the beginning of a new era – Hu Jintao era, when the sixty one year fourth generation leader got elected to the post of Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) during the Fourth Plenum of the 16th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (Beijing, September 16-19), making him the top party, state and military leader of the country.

Though ultimate power has now passed into the hands of Hu Jintao, it may not be correct to say that the leader will be supreme, unlike what was seen in the cases of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping both of whom enjoyed historic image and prestige. At the best, Hu is expected to play the role of a primus inter pares. The Plenum proceedings and official media articles emphasise that the Hu leadership will be a collective one. Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin were officially given the status of ‘core’ of the first, second and third generation leaderships respectively, but Hu Jintao is not being accorded such a treatment and the Party organs have mentioned him only as CCP general secretary, not as ‘core’ of fourth generation leadership. But will such a treatment continue? It may not, as in what appears to be an isolated description so far, as an item (People’s Daily, September 21, quoting China Daily) called Hu’s elevation as strengthening of his status as ‘core’ of a new generation leadership.

The Plenum Document:
The important Plenum ‘Decision’ document (herein after called ‘document’), the main features of which were released on September 26, throws light on the likely future trends in the fields of economy, politics, military and foreign relations under the Hu Jintao regime. Captioned “Enhancement of the Party’s Governance Capability”, it identifies ‘three historic tasks’ for the Party - modernization, reunification of the country and maintaining world peace and common development. Regarding the first task, the document stresses that ‘development’ would be a priority and the same would be based on the ‘scientific concept of putting people first’. This ‘people first’ concept, the brainchild of Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao in the post 16\textsuperscript{th} Party Congress period, is said to aim at achieving a balanced socio-economic development through job creation, improving the welfare system and narrowing the rural-urban divide. There is no doubt that the concept represents a new thrust, unnoticed during Jiang Zemin’s regime. The same needs to be understood in the context of Hu’s background – his experience in backward regions of Gansu, Guizhou and Tibet as Party chief while making direct contacts with masses there.

Concerning domestic politics, Hu Jintao appears to be in favour of further improving ‘inner party democracy’, while strongly opposing western political systems for China. The pledge given in the Plenum document to improve the election system in the party by ‘appropriately expanding the scope and ratio of multi-candidate recommendation’ and not allowing any ‘arbitrary’ role to heads of the party committees, appears to be significant in this connection. Also notably, immediately after the Plenum, the official media started giving publicity to the holding of some direct township-level elections to the party posts (Ya’an, Jiangsu).

Taking the third aspect of military field, Hu Jintao regime is expected to toe the traditional line of ‘party exercising absolute leadership over the military’. This line needs to be analysed in the context of opinions being expressed by some scholars in China since 1989 in favour of the Party’s loosening its control over state affairs, including the army. Party organs openly criticized such opinions in 2001. Secondly, the expansion of the CMC membership during the Plenum to 11 as against 8 in the outgoing as well as the new body’s representative character (members from all important military formations including main Military Regions, Strategic force of Second artillery etc), could be a pointer towards Hu’s willingness to take new and professionally sound initiatives at a time marked by the continuing military modernization and military confrontation between the mainland and Taiwan.

What will be the nature of the foreign policy under Hu Jintao regime? The document defines it by saying that China will follow the ‘independent foreign policy of peace’, so as to ‘create a good international and surrounding environment for the country’s modernization drive’. It, at the same time, gives top priority to safeguarding national sovereignty and state security at a time when ‘hostile forces are still pursuing their strategic attempts to westernize and divide China’. (In April 1999, Hu identified such forces as ‘major western powers’). The stress now being given to national security marks a new trend.

The non-inclusion in the document of the so far well publicized Hu Jintao’s “new security concept” (July 2000) and ‘peaceful rise’ foreign policy concept (November 2003) did not come as a surprise, as there appears to be a lack of consensus in China on its feasibility in the
current circumstances. The ‘new security concept’ was designed to define China’s role in a multi-polar world and as per the ‘peaceful rise’ concept, such a rise “will not stand in the way of any one else, will not pose a threat to any one and will not be realized at any one’s expense”. It may be recalled that even as late as March 2004, Premier Wen Jiabao supported the concept in his speech to the 10\textsuperscript{th} National People’s Congress. It is said that Jiang Zemin was not in favour of the concept. Some scholars have reportedly questioned the validity of the concept by arguing that it would mean an accommodation with US’ hegemony”.

**Conclusion:**

To sum up, the latest policy document suggests that there may not be any basic shift in China’s domestic and foreign policies under the Hu Jintao regime in the near future; but shifts in the emphasis from time to time are possible. However, any unforeseen deterioration in cross-Straits relations and complications in Sino-US relations as a result, could turn out to be unsettling factors, bringing Hu’s regime under new pressures to review the existing policies.

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