

New Phase in Japan-China Ties

By MINEO NAKAJIMA

The world has yet to understand the full political implications of the sudden and dramatic fall of Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang.

What is clear is that Deng Xiaoping and other top party leaders were caught off guard by the sudden burst of student unrest and the growing calls for greater democracy and liberalization by some of the country's leading intellectuals. In order to eliminate what they perceived as a threat to the prevailing system, they chose to take a symbolic step: the removal of Hu from the post of party secretary general.

The shake-up, however, has done little to dissipate the fundamental tensions underlying Chinese efforts to open up to the outside world. As long as this state of affairs persists, a political crisis seems inevitable, thus intensifying anxieties about the political stability of post-Deng China.

Slow vs. Speedy

In any case, the ouster of Hu has quashed expectations, both at home and abroad, of any rapid evolution from economic to political reforms and any further opening up of the country.

The series of events that has unfolded in Beijing can only be understood in terms of the confrontation between reformist and conservative camps within the Chinese leadership. It would, I suppose, be more appropriate to refer to the conservatives as "dogmatists." Their leaders are not against reforms as such, but they are wary of uncontrolled and hasty changes and push instead for "steady progress" while adhering to socialist principles.

It would be a mistake to assume that the dogmatists are new players on the political center stage. Even during the headiest days of the Deng-Hu reform program, the Chen Yun, Peng Zhen, and Li Xiannian groups were always busy in the background, issuing conflicting

advice on how China should be governed. Recent events have merely reconfirmed their considerable influence and support within Deng's coalition leadership.

It is widely agreed that these dogmatists leaders first began assuming a more prominent role during the CCP National Party Representatives Conference held in September 1985. The same forces also backed the sixth plenum's adoption last September of the party document "Guiding principles for building socialist spiritual civilization." Contrary to contemporary media reports, the document in effect set the stage for a curb on alleged excesses in the ongoing reform program.

Indeed, it was during the sixth plenum that the rift between Deng and Hu first opened, leading to rumors of a power struggle between the two men. Since then, the situation of the reformists has steadily deteriorated, leading to disarray within their ranks.

Last December's student demonstrations for greater democracy and liberalization provided a temporary morale boost for the reformist camp. But when the movement got out of control, Hu was forced out, presumably to take responsibility for what went wrong with the reform program and for his failure to deal resolutely with demands for greater liberalization.

Nakasone's Role

As this drama unfolds in Beijing, one must not overlook the role and influence of Japanese leaders in recent years.

In the last two or three years, in particular, politicians and businessmen from Japan have scurried to Beijing in endless succession. No doubt driven by dreams of China's market potential, these people have been anxious to give the Chinese all the help they need for immediate westernization. But in their haste to strengthen ties with China, the Japanese leaders have forgotten that the wounds caused by the Cultural Revolution and the long years of isolation under Mao Zedong will take time to heal.

Spurred by the conviction

that China has entered a period of prolonged stability under the Deng-Hu reformist regime, Japanese government leaders have hastened to cultivate friendly ties between the two countries. Again and again, the Japanese side has stressed the importance of friendly relations, insisting that other problems do not matter.

Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, for one, has never tired of boasting about his personal ties with Hu Yaobang. I have always considered it bad policy for Japan's leading statesmen to become too personally involved in China's internal affairs. I even pointed to the need to appreciate the wisdom of an ancient Chinese philosopher, Zhuang-zi (or Chuang-tzu), who preached that "dealings between the morally elevated should be pure as water, only underlings should dip their hands into nectar."

On various occasions, I have tried to warn against Nakasone's personal involvement with Hu. It is a pity that my warnings have fallen on deaf ears, for the stakes are high, not just for Nakasone himself, but for Japan.

Given its haste to strengthen ties with China, the Nakasone government has not only willfully disregarded warning signs, but has failed to take prudent precautions in the face of political uncertainty in China. One Nakasone pet project — the so-called Japan-China 2000 Group — for instance, has seen almost all of its Chinese members coming from the Hu group: including Hu himself and proteges from Hu's Chinese Communist Youth League days such as Politburo member Hu Qili and party secretary Wang Zhaoguo. Incidentally, these reformists are the very leaders who have fallen from grace during the recent shakeup.

Nakasone's Indiscretion

Political naivete apart, Prime Minister Nakasone stumbled into another unforgivable folly when he visited Beijing last November. Nakasone ostensibly undertook the hastily arranged trip to attend the cornerstone-laying ceremony of

the Japan-China Youth Center and to offer his personal apologies for then-Education Minister Masayuki Fujio's controversial remarks about Japan's relations with China and Korea before and during World War II.

Although we have no way of knowing whether the prime minister was aware of the evolving political debate in China, the speech that he gave — in Hu Yaobang's presence — was provocative to a vault.

Opens Big Mouth Again

"Young people are always the motive force behind human progress. It was the selfless struggle by a large number of Japanese young people against conservative forces that transformed feudal Japan into a modern country," Nakasone told his Chinese audience.

There is little doubt that the Chinese saw the speech as supportive of the reformist camp headed by Hu. Worse still, Nakasone sounded as if he were inciting his audience to fight against those conservatives blocking the path of reform.

Thanks to Nakasone's thoughtlessness, Hu had the humiliation of being likened to Wang Ching-wei, a wartime collaborator with Japan, a comparison that no doubt added to his difficulties with the dogmatists within the Chinese leadership.

Unfortunately, the damage caused by Nakasone's slip of tongue will not be limited to the fallen Hu. By siding so blatantly with the reformists Nakasone ensured hostility toward Japan on the part of dogmatist leaders coming into power in Hu's wake. The uncompromising Chinese attitude toward the slight increase of the Japanese defense budget is but a harbinger of things to come.

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