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Engineering China's future

NEVER in the field of modern leadership change has so much been made by so many pundits on so little information. Last week's 16th Congress of the Communist Party in Beijing rarified the art of China-watching to the level of a millenarian event. What surfaced was a transfer of power in the finest imperial tradition, shrouded in secrecy and recondite manoeuvring. The nine members of the new Politburo Standing Committee in the biggest leadership shuffle since the death of Mao Zedong revealed nothing but a fixed determination to sustain the communist dynasty and push on with Deng Xiaoping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics".

Little is known of Hu Jintao, the new party chief destined to succeed President Jiang Zemin in March, and even less of his colleagues in the Politburo, who will continue to take China as far as it can go down the road of capitalism without risking the party's monopoly on power. Jiang filled most of the senior positions with his own proteges and will continue to head the Central Military Commission after he steps down. Deng had done the same to keep his eye on government and party affairs after his official retirement in 1987. Perhaps Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad should also hold a similar position of prestige over Malaysia's transition to a new generation of leaders.

The little that is known about Hu and the Standing Committee members starts with the fact that they are all, like Jiang, engineers by training. The "fourth generation" of leaders began their careers after the communist takeover in 1949, and evince little of the Maoist severity that inspired the endurance of the Long March. They cut their teeth under Deng's market reforms from 1978 onwards and had the limits of liberalisation burned into them by the Tiananmen Square uprising 11 years later. The chances of a repeat of the reckless ideological splurges of Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution or of a potentially suicidal Gorbachev-style glasnost and perestroika are therefore virtually nil.

Since Deng, China's answer to the shattered dream of utopian Marxism is to start a new one. Jiang's successors won't revive the class struggle but will grasp it within the party's all-encompassing embrace. His "Three Represents" - a coda to the communist gospel according to Mao and Deng - obliges his party to enlist "the most advanced productive forces in China" instead of just the proletariat. What the new leaders have to deal with are not the revolutionary rigours of the "iron rice bowl" but these simple facts: eight per cent economic growth, foreign direct investment topping US\$50 billion, the largest inflow ever, and a burgeoning middle class approaching five per cent of the population, or 65 million people.

On the obverse side are a banking sector reeling under the enforced debt burden of inefficient state industries, unemployment, social dislocation, income inequalities, corruption. These are big, epoch-shaping issues that will keep the senior leadership (average age about 60) busy for some time to come. The technocrats will stick to their blueprint of developing the country's potentially vast economy without distraction, and so will seek stable external relations wherever possible.

A China so pragmatically preoccupied with itself is less likely to ruffle its neighbours. On the contrary, it stole the show at the Asean Summit in Phnom Penh recently, underwriting a slate of co-operative agreements on a combined free-trade area, terrorism, cybercrime, people-smuggling, agriculture and, perhaps most significantly, on security in the

South China Sea. Straws are still being clutched over whether Beijing is, or is wise to, see the end of the cult of the paramount leader. Hu's accession could indicate a movement to a more collective leadership, a sort of democracy with Chinese characteristics that the world would feel even more compelled to engage than it does now.