



In brief: China – Recent political and security developments

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In October 2010, the Fifth Plenum of the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party brought speculation to an end about who would succeed the current Chinese leadership in 2012-13, after what has become a standard tenure of ten years, by appointing Vice-President [Xi Jinping](#) the Vice-Chair of the Central Military Commission. The person who is appointed to this position is expected to go on to become President of the People's Republic. Vice-Premier [Li Keqiang](#) is expected to become the Premier, replacing Wen Jiabao. Li Keqiang was thought originally to be the favoured candidate for the presidency of current President Hu Jintao and his faction. However, the faction gathered around former President Jiang Zemin, barring a major upset, appears to have secured the post for Xi.

Xi Jinping is what is known as a 'princeling' –the term applied to senior officials whose families have a long history of leadership within the party, giving them a considerable advantage in their rise to power. Born in Beijing in 1953, Xi is the son of revolutionary veteran Xi Zhongxun, one of the Communist Party's founding fathers. He is an engineer by profession and cut his political teeth with stints in Hebei and Fujian Provinces, then becoming party chief in Shanghai in 2007. But to many in China, Xi is best known for his famous wife, the singer Peng Liyuan. He is strongly anti-corruption and is viewed as having a genuine appetite for economic and social reform, provided that the authority of the party is unchallenged. Political changes will in all likelihood be limited to those that are compatible with the system, unless events (most likely, a convergence of labour/rural protest and intra-party turbulence in the context of a major economic downturn) dramatically revise the 'rules of the game'. While from different party factions, Xi and Li, the 'fifth generation' of leaders, will be expected to maintain party and national stability at all costs. The new leaders will inherit a country that, for all its breakneck economic development, faces major challenges. Rapid economic transitions of the kind that China is experiencing often produce unexpected social and political results. They will be well aware of this.

China's military modernisation is proceeding apace, although the 7.5% increase in defence expenditure announced for 2010 was the first time it had fallen beneath 10% for 20 years (many question the reliability of the official figures). In early January 2011, the People's Liberation Army carried out a test flight of its advanced laser-evading stealth fighter J-20, timing the event to coincide with the visit of US Defense Secretary Robert Gates to the country. Chinese media say that the J-20 ([View Full Image](#)) is the country's answer to the US's F-22 Raptor. Analysts assert that the fighter will be equipped with large missiles and could reach as far as the island of Guam, a US territory in the western pacific, thanks to its ability to refuel while in the air. The J-20 appears to be several years from active use. No less

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significant, according to some observers, was the fact that the party leadership genuinely seemed unaware that such a test flight had been planned, suggesting that fault-lines remain between the political and military wings of the party. Such developments reflect an apparent determination on the part of China gradually to increase military reach and influence in tandem with its growing global economic clout. In November 2010, a Chinese-financed and built deep-water port opened at Hambantota in Sri Lanka, which some believe may be used in future by the Chinese Navy.

The rhetoric of the party leadership continues to emphasise China's 'peaceful rise'. However, the US regularly raises concerns about China's military expenditure – not least its secrecy about what it is really spending – and about its growing regional assertiveness. China has become more strident over its territorial claims in the East and South China seas, elevating them for the first time to the status of 'core national interests' (ie. on a par with Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang) as evidenced by the [clash](#) with Japan in September 2010. As earlier flashpoints of this kind have done, the clash led to anti-Japanese public protests in China, reminding the world that growing nationalism at least partly underpins the country's 'rise' – an ideology which the Government sometimes tries to harness and on other occasions to restrain. China reacted angrily in January 2010 when the US Administration announced major arms sales to Taiwan. The majority of Western analysts believe that the Chinese Government remains committed to a 'rise' which makes as few enemies as possible – a point underscored during President Hu Jintao's visit to Washington, DC, last month – but argue that its record remains mixed and that it still has some way to go before it can be considered a 'responsible international stakeholder'.

The UK Government, which has been pushing hard to boost UK-China trade, was subjected to criticism by advocacy groups last month during a visit to London by Li Keqiang. These groups argued that the longstanding UK-China human rights dialogue had produced little – not least on Tibet, where intermittent talks between Chinese officials and representatives of the Dalai Lama over recent years have taken place without effect. In 2008, the previous Labour Government clarified the long-held UK position that Beijing had suzerainty over Tibet in a statement that unambiguously opposed Tibetan independence and said that the UK considered it part of China. The present Government has not changed this position. Critics of China's human rights record also point, as an indicator that little has changed, to its hostile response to the awarding in 2010 of the Nobel peace prize to imprisoned dissident Li Xiaobo.

Relations between mainland China and Taiwan, which have been largely positive in recent years, have deteriorated somewhat over the past few months. The Guomindang-led Government in Taipei fared poorly in mayoral elections in November 2010 and may as a result decide to take a cooler line towards Beijing in the run-up to the next national elections, which are scheduled for 2012. Taiwan took Japan's side during the latter's September 2010 spat with China in the East China Sea and is pressing for further arms sales (including F16C/D jets and electric-diesel submarines) from the US. On 9 February Taiwan announced that one of its top generals had been arrested on suspicion of spying for China. However, the mainland Chinese and Taiwanese economies continue to become ever more intertwined following the signing in June 2010 of a major economic cooperation agreement.

Background reading:

Library Research Paper 06/36, [A Political and Economic Introduction to China](#); Library Research Paper 08/15, [China's Military Posture](#); Kerry Brown and Loh Su Hsing, [Trying to Read the New 'Assertive' China Right](#), Chatham House, January 2011

See also the following Standard Notes: SN/EP/5580, [China: Development Aid \(UK and other donors\)](#) (September 2010); SN/IA/5156, [China: A Chronological Guide to Recent Events](#) (March 2009).