EDITORIAL

Transitions in leadership: China and the USA

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Abstract

Purpose – Few may be aware of how the future scenario of global leadership is in the process of a major structural transformation. The purpose of this paper, through historical, comparative research, is to highlight these changes in leadership within China and the USA. In the past, there were some six changes in US Presidents during Mao’s single-handed rule in China. In the future, it is very likely to be a one-on-one correspondence. Thus, if President Barrack Obama is not re-elected, both China and the USA will see two new Presidents at the helm. Also, some insights are offered on the future leader of China, Xi Jin Ping; and one possible scenario, both of them may step down at the same time!

Design/methodology/approach – Using historical data on the changes of leadership in China and the USA, a comparative chart is drawn up. A statistical graph is utilized to illustrate how the pattern of interactions between American and Chinese leaders is changing; from the six for Mao Zedong, down to four (Deng Xiaoping), three (Jiang Zemin), two (Hu Jintao) and very likely one for the forthcoming leader, Xi Jin Ping. A numerical measure of “correspondence ratio” is suggested to reflect the structural changes in the interactions between the leaders of the world’s trading nations.

Findings – For there to be global peace, both China and the USA must develop warm, friendly interpersonal relationships. If there are deep inter-personal relationships between the leaders of these two countries, then there is a much better hope for the rest of the world. This research into the pattern of changing leaderships in the USA and China shows a strong likelihood in the future of a leadership correspondence ratio of 1:1. In the past, during the era of Mao Zedong, it had been as high as 6:1. In other words, from the perspective of Mao Zedong, he had to keep on updating, renewing his interpersonal contacts with a different leader. Perhaps, in studying leadership, a broader pattern should be investigated – the transitions in leaders and their impacts.

Practical implications – Whether it is a country or an organization or a company, whenever a leader changes, there will be consequences. In this paper, a psychological analysis is made of Xi Jin Ping. Drawing on his socio-educational, family and marital backgrounds, the author suggests Xi Jin Ping is very likely to be a balanced leader. The arguments to support this perspective are succinctly presented in a diagram. The leadership of President Hu Jintao may be seen as quiet (even hidden) yet very highly effective. With Xi Jin Ping, there will be a transition towards higher profile with implementation of well reasoned, practical policies.

Originality/value – This paper highlights, for the first time, the structural change in the pattern of leadership. A correspondence ratio is suggested to empirically measure the early 1950s-1970s period of high transitions in Presidential leadership in the USA vis-a-vis no transition in China. Also, it is emphasized that, in the very near future, both China and the USA are likely to experience a 1:1 transition in leadership change. This structural change means our global future may depend on just how well the two top leaders from China and the USA interact. For future research, studies in leadership may explore this perspective; also the impact of the rate of transitions in leaderships on interactions between nations, organizations and corporations.

Keywords China, United States of America, Government, Leaders, International relations, Chinese leaders, Xi Jin Ping, US Presidents, Correspondence ratio, Transitions in leaderships

Paper type Conceptual paper
The theme of this second issue is most timely in focusing on HRM and leadership. Despite the frequent exchanges between the leaders of China and the USA, the risks remain of an outbreak of a global conflict. Indeed, I am personally surprised that President Hu Jintao was quoted (www.envirosagainstwar.org/know/read.php?itemid=11711) to have told the Chinese Navy to ready themselves for war.

This was reinforced by an even more threatening stance of Zhang Zhaozhong, the authoritative Chinese admiral as well as professor, National Defense University: “China will not hesitate to protect Iran even with a third world war” (www.envirosagainstwar.org/know/read.php?itemid=11711). Any one who grasps the Chinese strategic mind will read Iran to include North Korea, a country in midst of transition in leadership.

With such an utterance at topmost level, China will likely reinforce by military intervention, the leadership of the youthful Kim Jong Un. Thus, the military drills by South Korea, run the risk of not only a total war (Korean Central News Agency, www.foxnews.com/world/2012/02/19/north-korea-threatens-to-attack-south-korea-over-planned-military-drills/) but of an outbreak of a global Third World War.

Picture the unimaginably destructive scenario: exchanges of utterly awesome nuclear missiles. And all targets set on densely populated cities on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps, it is worth re-asking ourselves: can such decisions ever be justifiable, rains of nuclear warheads?

The answer is absolutely no!

The burden of decision rests on the leadership of China and the USA. Thus, 2012 is highly significant for both Chinese and American people. For China, there is the much anticipated, long planned for transition in leadership. This time is from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. For the USA, there is the distinct possibility of a change in presidency following the scheduled for November 6 election.

By the end of 2012, we may be seeing two different leaders, one from a rising power and the other a superpower (but much in decline), interacting with each other. Whilst momentous events may be outside the control of a single individual yet these two leaders – and their interpersonal interactions – may be the secret keys to a lasting world peace.

If so, it is surprising that nobody has as yet map out the past interactions between the leaders of the USA with China. That is from 1949 when the People's Republic of China is founded. During Mao's era of paramount leadership, he interacted with Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. In a continuous grip on power, Mao Zedong handled in serial transitions, a string of six American Presidents.

Following the Mao's era, Deng Xiaoping then dealt with Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and the senior, George Bush. Altogether, it is a line of four different presidents. Then Jiang Zemin three in a row: senior George Bush, Bill Clinton and George Bush (Jr).

Coming on to Hu Jintao, it is down to two, George Bush (Jr) and Barrack Obama. This mapping of the successive US Presidents interacting specifically with each Chinese paramount leader is reflected in the Figures 1 and 2.

If the pattern of interactions in the number of US Presidents with each paramount Chinese leader is plotted as a chart, one trend becomes clear. We are entering into a
different era of interpersonal interactions. Depending on the outcome of 2012 US presidential election we may land with a perfect 1:1 match. For next decade of 2012-2022, Xi Jinping as China’s paramount leader may interact with one and the same US President (Figure 3).

If this is the case, our future global scenario may heavily be influenced by the nature of interactions between Xi Jinping and the next newly elected President of the USA.
Figure 3.
A more synchronized transition in leadership, China and the USA

(assuming his re-election in 2017). Or if Barack Obama wins his re-election then it will be as similar to Hu Jintao, be a more complex matter of relating with two different US Presidents.

Clearly this makes a deeper understanding of who Xi Jinping, the upcoming leader of China a very useful exercise. Such a question may already be up in your mind, for example: as a leader just what is Xi Jinping's posture on China vis-à-vis the outside world?

Perhaps, his exact words on this matter may reflect the inner pattern, dynamics and firing of his thinking:

1. 有些吃饱没事干的外国人,
2. 对我们的事情指手画脚。
3. 中国:  
   * 一不输出革命，
   * 二不输出饥饿和贫困，
   * 三不折腾你们，
4. 还有什么好说的？

Let me render for you, his choice of these specific Chinese characters to express his opinions in *pinyin* (in case, you may want to quote him precisely) before explaining its import in English:

1.  you xie chi bao mei shi gan the wai guo ren;  
2.  dui wo men de shi qing zhi shuo hua jiao; and  
3.  zhong guo:  
   * yi bu shu chu ge ming;  
   * er bu shu chu ji e he pin kun; and  
   * san bu zhe teng ni men.  
4.  hai you shen me hao shuo de.
Overall, Xi Jinping’s perspectives are simply these:

1. Some altogether well-fed and well-off foreigners (note: despite three decades of unprecedented rapid growing economy, China remains on a per capita basis, a poor thus still hungry country) with nothing better to do, like to intervene (or interfere) in our internal Chinese affairs.

2. Now, China:
   - One, has not exported revolutionary movement;
   - Two, has not spread hunger and poverty; and
   - Three, has not caused troubles for outsiders.

3. What more is there for us to say (discuss)?

As seen above, his unconscious mind functions in much a reductive (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reductionism), summative, synthesizing approach in reflecting on an issue. This is very much akin too how the deeply strategic minds of Sunzi or Mao Zedong seem to work. The sequencing of his thoughts:

- The root source of criticism.
- Contrasting this with reality.
- Is any action (say) justified?

If not, is there anything we need to do or say? Remember, Lao Tzu emphasizes non-action.

Then you may ask, what is the one best descriptor of Xi Jinping as China’s paramount leader? To respond to that, I undertook a review of literature on his background: education, family life, work exposure, East-West exposure and periods of turmoil and stability.

I present a summary of my insights in Figure 4. And if you need a handle on his personal qualities, these are my suggestions of his harmoniously, balanced personality: “tough yet kind”, “intellectual yet practical” (pragmatic), “peace loving yet war ready” and “analytical yet synthesizer”.

So far I have written about leadership yet this issue concerns too about human resource (people) as well. Any Chinese leader has little choice but to enhance
the living standards of the other half of 1.3 billion. Or at least, the Chinese leader has to motivate the masses to stay the course with Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In this aspect, Xi Jinping himself has a most powerful ally: his wife, Peng Liyuan (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peng_Liyuan) and analogously, the future China’s first lady.

Her many songs are laden with emotional, rural themes that are highly inspiring and motivating. She holds the rank (civilian equivalent) of a major general in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Just hear her sing on the YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=azF6PFi-xE) and see her leading role in this patriotic song (qi zhi song):

《旗帜颂》(qi zhi song).

“[…]…我们万众一心 (wo men wan zhong yi xin).

团结奋斗坚强如钢 (tuan jie fei feng dou jian qiang ru gang).

手挽手 迎风踏浪 […]” (shou wan shou ying feng ta lang).

These couplets are a call for the people, chorus style: “Millions upon millions to be all of one mind (heart); united in our struggle, we are tough as steel; with hand-in-hand we meet the winds and step on (rising) waves.” Incidentally, the last phrase ying feng ta lang is in resonance with President Hu’s instruction to the Chinese Navy, “[…] prepare for war […]”

Yet Hu Jintao as China’s current paramount leader is truly yearning on behalf of the Chinese people for global peace. Remember the paradoxical theory of war: the best strategy to avoid war is to be thoroughly prepared for one. The original quote is derived from a classical Roman text on military strategy: in Latin, “Igitur qui desiderat pacem, praepearet bellum” (source: Epitoma Rei Militaris (www.archive.org/details/epitomareimilit0orenagoog, downloadable), by Publiius Flavius Vegetius Renatus).

The Chinese pragmatic perspective in relation to war and peace is still best as articulated by China’s founding paramount leader, Chairman Mao Zedong. In his own words written in November 6, 1938 and published in the chapter on Problems of War and Strategy and under the section heading of “The war history of the Kuomintang” within his Selected Works, Vol II, at page 225 (see the original in English; www.scribd.com/doc/4315838/Selected-Works-of-Mao-TseTung-Volume-2) as follows:

[…] We are advocates of the abolition of war,
We do not want war.
But war can only be abolished through war […] (italics added).

Our goal must surely be for us to improve on his view: work towards abolishing war without the necessity of returning to war.

In conclusion, I must thank Professor Zhang Yenming for his guest editorial of this issue of Chinese Management Studies. With his editorial, I am able to devote time for writing this piece on transitions in leadership.
About the author
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