The strange absence of China's vice president

John Chan
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Vice President Xi Jinping's disappearance from public life since September 1 is becoming another source of political instability as the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime prepares for a key leadership transition at its upcoming 18th congress.

Xi has not been seen in public and has cancelled meetings with visiting foreign figures, including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on September 5. Last week, he failed to appear at a meeting of the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC), on which he serves as vice chairman.

Xi was expected to take over the top posts of party general secretary, Chinese president and CMC chairman from President Hu Jintao at the CCP congress. His unexplained absence has resulted in a rash of speculation in China and internationally. Various stories claim he has suffered everything from a back injury or heart attack to a car accident. Chinese authorities have made no official statement. Instead they censored the Internet for any search that contains "Xi".

Even if Xi is ill or injured, that cannot explain his public disappearance. The Stalinist bureaucracy in Beijing has a Machiavellian tradition of using "illness" to remove officials who are out of favour. For instance, Lin Biao, once China's top army general, was reportedly ill for years during the early 1960s, only to be brought back to health to become Mao Zedong's heir apparent during the so-called Cultural Revolution, when the army was needed to suppress the working class. After again falling out of favour, Lin died in 1971 in a still unexplained plane crash as he purportedly fled to the Soviet Union.

This year has already witnessed strange political events in China, beginning with the sudden purge of Chongqing party secretary and former Politburo member, Bo Xilai, in March. While the pretext was a scandal involving the murder of a British business associate, Bo's removal pointed to political infighting in the top CCP leadership between the two major factions—the Young Communist League group led by President Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao, and the "Shanghai gang" headed by former President Jiang Zemin and Zhou Yongkang, the state security chief on the Politburo Standing Committee.

Zhou has reportedly been stripped of his powers for supporting Bo. Earlier this month, President Hu's key aide, Ling Jihua, was sidelined as lurid details leaked out about his son's alleged involvement in a car crash.

The most obvious sign of political crisis is that no date has been set for the party congress, despite the expectation that it would take place next month. Such congresses are normally orchestrated down to the last detail months, if not years, in advance.

The *New York Times* reported on Wednesday that the annual leadership retreat at the seaside resort of Beidaihe in August broke up without any agreement over the composition of the new leadership or party's direction for the next 10 years. The gathering involved the current leadership as well as top military and state officials, retired party elders and the descendants of former leaders.

A political analyst connected to the CCP's General Office told the *Times*: "The atmosphere was very bad, and the struggle was very intense." A veteran party scholar said the meeting was short, and only a list of 2,000 congress delegates was finalised. There was no proposed list of new leaders and no deliberation on the drafts of the political reports to be presented at the congress. "We thought that these issues would be settled there, but they weren't," he said.

The scholar further told the *Times* that he had dined late last week with a close family member of Xi. The relative had told him that he was not aware that Xi was ill. The scholar maintained that Xi's absence was likely due to the "unsettled political situation", adding: "There is still a struggle; it is not finished."

Xi emerged at the last party congress in 2007 as a compromise candidate to take over as president after Hu apparently failed to win acceptance of his protégé, Vice Premier Li Keqiang, because of opposition from the Shanghai faction. Li is currently favoured to become the next premier.

At the heart of the factional disputes are disagreements over how China is to respond to its economic slowdown and the increasingly aggressive efforts by the US to undermine Chinese influence throughout Asia. The Hu-Wen leadership's economic policy is based on accelerating pro-market restructuring to attract foreign investment, while its diplomatic strategy rests on Hu's doctrine of China's "peaceful rise"—that is, avoiding conflict with the US.

This program has increasingly come under fire. A loose grouping of academics and media commentators associated with Bo, and known as the New Left, has criticised the government's "neo-liberal" economic policies, and advocated protectionism and the strengthening of state-owned enterprises. This is dressed up with appeals to return to the CCP's "socialist" origins as a means of duping the working class and blocking an independent political movement fighting for genuine socialism.

The Shanghai faction, which presided over wholesale privatisations during the 1990s and the transformation of China into the world's largest sweatshop, has given tactical support to Bo. This does not indicate support for the New Left's rhetoric or a more confrontational policy toward the US. Both the YCL and Shanghai factions represent layers of the CCP bureaucracy whose children took over some of China's largest state-owned companies and act as agents for major Western corporations.

For the Shanghai gang, "maintaining socialism" simply means preserving the CCP's monopoly on power and ruthlessly suppressing any opposition. Jiang Zemin, who came to power in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, has always been deeply suspicious of any call for even limited "political reform". The lesson he drew from the Tiananmen Square protests was that the demands of students for democratic rights had opened the door for workers to emerge with their own class demands that the regime could not accommodate, necessitating police-state measures.

Jiang's predecessor Zhao Ziyang, who was placed under house arrest after the massacre, had argued that limited democratisation was needed for the regime to build a social base for its pro-market agenda among sections of the emerging middle classes, including the intelligentsia. Jiang was always wary of the Hu-Wen leadership, especially Wen, who had been a top aide to Zhao. Even after he retired, Jiang retained significant political influence via his key protégés in the top Politburo Standing Committee.

In this light, it is possible that Jiang's Shanghai faction regards Xi as having drawn too close to the YCL faction of Hu and Wen. Not only did Xi support the investigation of Bo, but he reportedly has been contemplating political reforms. According to a Reuters article, citing internal party sources, Xi had been meeting in the past six weeks with a significant individual, Hu Deping, "in a gesture intended to show he was listening to voices calling not only for faster economic liberalisation but also a relaxation of political control."

Hu Deping is the son of former CCP general secretary Hu Yaobang, who was ousted by Deng Xiaoping for promoting "bourgeois liberalisation" on the university campuses. Hu Yaobang's death in April 1989 prompted the student protests that led to the weeks of demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. In recent years, Premier Wen has published articles defending Hu Yaobang in an attempt to politically rehabilitate him and his ideas.

Of course, the cloak of secrecy that surrounds the internal machinations of the top CCP leadership makes it difficult to draw any hard-and-fast conclusions. It is clear, however that this year's events point to a deepening factional war, fuelled by China's economic downturn, sharpening social tensions at home and Washington's aggressive use of its military might to undermine potential rivals.