Hu Jintao

Hú Jǐntāo 胡锦涛

b. 1942  President of China (2002–present)

Hu Jintao is the current President of the People’s Republic of China. During his two terms in office he has faced several crises, with varying degrees of success. His handling of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake was initially praised for his break from previous government secrecy but later criticized outside China after widespread media censorship of the event became apparent. He has been very active in promoting development at home and improving foreign relations, notably with Taiwan.

Born in Shanghai in December 1942, with ancestral roots in Anhui Province, Hu Jintao graduated in 1965 from China’s Qinghua University, Department of Irrigation Engineering. He joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in April 1964 and became a political/ideological counselor for students while in college. After graduation, Hu worked as an engineer at the Liujiaxia Irrigation Works in Gansu Province, northwestern China.

Chosen by Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) to be a leader of the so-called fourth generation of leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Hu was ranked as the fifth and the youngest standing member of the seven-member Political Bureau of the CCP during Jiang Zemin’s era (1989–2002) and succeeded Jiang in 2002. He had been head of the Chinese Communist Youth League (January 1983–July 1985), party secretary of Guizhou Province (July 1985–November 1988), and the party secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region (December 1988–January 1991). Currently Hu serves as president of the PRC, as well as general secretary of CCP’s Central Committee, and chairman of the CCP’s Military Affairs Committee.

Since his succession to Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao has taken an active role in developing China’s foreign relations. The first developments were the introduction of the concepts “harmonious society” and “peaceful rise,” the latter of which was proposed in 2003 by Chairman of the China Reform Forum Zheng Bijian. Peaceful rise, later termed the peaceful development path by Hu, was touted as a path of economic development that could raise “China’s population out of a state of underdevelopment” (Glaser & Medeiros 2007, 295) while working cooperatively with other countries to promote national security and world peace. The concept of peaceful development also included Cross-Strait relations between Taiwan and the mainland. In 2006, Hu stated that China’s foreign policy would include a peaceful approach to the Taiwan issue. As a result of this goal, which was developed via consultations with the United States, tensions between the Mainland and Taiwan lessened, and economic and agricultural cooperation improved. This was helped by the election of the more conciliatory Guomindang (Kuomintang, [KMT]) under Ma Ying-Jiao in the Taiwanese Presidential elections in 2008.

These socioeconomic developments were evidence of Hu’s philosophy of a “harmonious society” that places people at the center of policy decisions and debates. At the Seventeenth National Congress of the CCP in October
2007, Hu asserted that China’s primary goal was to become “a well-off society that would ensure balanced economic growth, improvement of people’s well being and social justice” (Jianhai Bi 2008, 17). This goal included dispersing China’s wealth by retooling income distribution policies and balancing growth between rural and urban areas. Hu’s focus on government for the people exemplified his ideology, which was based expressly on Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents,” a guiding belief system that centered on learning, politics, and integrity. This ideology was not without its critics, however, who claimed that Hu’s rhetoric about the administration working for the people’s best interests allowed him to impose his own agenda. Such claims were not uncommon or far-fetched given the corruption scandals of Communist leaders since the 1980s.

Throughout Hu’s term as president there was an increase in anti-corruption campaigns, but top officials remained beyond investigation, which became problematic during times of national crises when information was not
communicated and governmental activity was not transparent. During the SARS outbreak in 2003, official announcements were slow to materialize and numerous cases went unreported by hospitals and health officials. This crisis provided Hu and his administration with the opportunity to make policy changes, particularly with regard to accountability of governmental officials and to media ownership. Significant changes, however, were slow to materialize. Instead, the opportunity was used primarily to legitimize the CCP and bolster Hu’s position therein.

Unlike during the SARS crisis of 2003, Hu’s administration was praised by the international community for its rescue and relief efforts and for its initially allowed open reporting of the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008, which left nearly 80,000 dead or missing. This praise was short lived, however, as reports began to surface of thousands of schools collapsing because of poor construction. State-controlled media censored reports about the school collapses amidst protests from parents and teachers, some of whom were detained. In early 2009, reports speculated that the earthquake might have been induced by the 320 million tons of water held back by the four-year-old Zipingpu Reservoir, a government sponsored project that was meant to provide power and water for drinking and irrigation to the Sichuan region.

China under Hu experienced continuing strong economic growth. In 2007, the beginning of Hu’s second five-year term, the trade surplus with the US and the EU exceeded $260 billion and foreign reserves moved to a record $2 trillion at the end of 2008. Hu expanded foreign interests, paying visits to the United States, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe to propagate his ideas of China’s peaceful rise and harmonious society. Economic progress was one of the top priorities of Hu’s administration, the focus of which was on developing global industry and advancing Chinese brands.

During his second tenure as President of China, the 29th Olympic Games was held in Beijing, China, during the summer of 2008, bringing unprecedented attention to the People’s Republic. Hu is due to be replaced as President and Party Secretary in 2012.

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