



Stability: The New Paramount Leader



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CONTENTS


[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Report by Roger Cavazos](#)

[III. Citations](#)

[IV. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

 Roger Cavazos, Nautilus Institute Associate, writes, "Zhang Dejiang's ascension as Party Chief in Chongqing is modeled on a proven formula for putting in a steady, consistent leader. Given Zhang's DPRK connections and a PRC preference for stability Sino-DPRK relations will plod along in a more or less positive small steps, but they likely won't deteriorate, either. The DPRK also has another channel for improved relations and communications with China since Zhang is a known quantity to the DPRK leadership."

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II. Report by Roger Cavazos

-“Stability: The New Paramount Leader”

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Zhang Dejiang’s ascension as Party Chief in Chongqing is modeled on a proven formula for putting in a steady, consistent leader. Given Zhang’s DPRK connections and a PRC preference for stability Sino-DPRK relations will plod along in a more or less positive small steps, but they likely won’t deteriorate, either. The DPRK also has another channel for improved relations and communications with China since Zhang is a known quantity to the DPRK leadership.

Stability: The New Paramount Leader

Zhang Dejiang was likely appointed as the Party Chief for Chongqing based on his past proven ability to handle uncertain situations and keep a low profile. The Communist Party clearly spoke: Rule of Law and stability triumphs over Rule of Personality and uncertainty. Zhang’s ascension was announced with the terse formulaic language one reads at all levels from district, city, county, provincial and now national leadership: “Duty Adjustment of Comrades Responsible for LOCATION” “LOCATION 主要负责同志职务调整.” [1]

The Party likely meant to show that all Party Officials are equal, whether they’re far from Beijing or sitting in Zhongnanhai (China’s Senior-most Leadership Compound). Party Discipline is the same no matter one’s status in the Party. There are consequences for bucking the consensus, and officials are “responsible” “负责” - as far as the Party is concerned.

By raising the specter of the “Cultural Revolution” Premier Wen Jiabao was taking an unusually public swing at a senior Chinese leader. More importantly, he was sending a message to the country that the consensus position was to maintain stability. In the dialectic construct common in China, “chaos (Cultural Revolution)” and “stability” are diametrically opposed. Stability is the new paramount leader; not a person, but a quality.

From Kim Il Sung University Economics Department to Governing 29 million people

Zhang spent most of his formative years from 1946 until 1996 in the border area near the DPRK or in the DPRK.[2] However, he also was responsible for governing at the provincial-level in the booming economic areas of Guangdong and Zhejiang provinces. He served there for 5 and 4 years, respectively with fairly impressive economic growth occurring during the entire time. Chongqing was given special status as a Direct-Controlled Municipality (自治区) meaning it is directly under the national government and is considered provincial-level. The closest U.S. analog is Washington, D.C.

Zhang is a person who has been trusted to act independently and has demonstrated the ability to keep an area economically viable and relatively clean. Aside from stability, economic expansion is next highest priority on the list. They want Chongqing to keep making money, open up the West, and raise the standard of living of inland Chinese. The PRC would also like to see the same for DPRK leadership and citizens.

While serving as a Vice Minister, Zhang managed critical energy security issues, a highly technocratic field. He also spent much time making sure Chongqing and the entire country had enough energy to meet civilian, industrial, manufacturing and military demands. The DPRK has always been interested in producing enough energy to meet its demands. Certainly, there were many interactions between Zhang and the DPRK in the field of energy.

A subtle nudge or straw the DPRK can grasp is that an alumnus of Kim Il Sung University is now running a vibrant megalopolis of 29 million people and all kinds of international investment.

However, Zhang will have to do some business balancing: Sino-Korean Economic & Trade Joint Committee has racked up 18 meetings.[3] The PRC-DPRK Economic Zone Committee concluded their second meeting this year. [4]

Sino-DPRK economic growth is on an upward trajectory, albeit from a very low base. The border area Zhang and soon-to-be Premier Li Keqiang called home now has four Special Economic Zones between China and the DPRK and at least 125 PRC-DPRK companies registered. More importantly, with people like Jang Song Taek and Chen Deming (China's Minister of Commerce) chairing the PRC-DPRK Economic Zone Committee, as well as over 3 billion dollar PRC investment, this is a different dynamic than before.

New Channel?

Zhang is a known quantity to the North Koreans.[5] Sino-DPRK relations are handled Party to Party, but on several occasions, Zhang has been the primary interlocutor. Thus he may represent a new comfortable channel to and from DPRK. Some indicators of positive motion would be exchanges or visits from DPRK to Chongqing. In Chinese this would be a case of 借尸还魂, : "borrow a corpse to return the soul" or using Zhang and the DPRK leadership's previous interactions to create a new channel. As long as both parties agree it is an established channel, that's all that matters. Zhang can be trusted to keep the relationship low-key yet keep the Party informed.

Expect Slower Progress and Slightly Less Regression

It is unprecedented for the U.S., PRC, ROK and DPRK to have senior leadership turnover at almost the same time since they are on 4, 10 and 5 year cycles, respectively. In uncertain times, the natural inclination is to take it slow. Relations between PRC and DPRK are almost always exclusively handled on a party to party basis with International Liaison Department (ILD) (中联部) handling relations, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The head of ILD is Wang Jiarui. He has been in the job since 2003 and is very likely to move up in the 18th Party Plenum in October of this year as part of the once a decade leadership transition in China. If he moves, Sino-DPRK relations would lose two senior interlocutors and even further increase the natural propensity to slow down in the uncertainty. However, there is at least enough momentum - and food - for things to stay relatively static for a year or so.

III. Citations

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III. Nautilus invites your responses

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