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# SIZING UP CHINA'S NEXT LEADER

WikiLeaks cables show the U.S. developing its take on Xi Jinping

BY PAUL ECKERT  
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**W**HAT DOES THE UNITED STATES make of Xi Jinping, the man widely expected to take over from Hu Jintao late next year and lead China for the next five or 10 years?

An unpublished WikiLeaks batch of U.S. diplomatic cables portrays the 57-year-old Xi as untainted by corruption -- he is referred to as "Mr Clean" -- and disdainful of China's nouveau riche and consumer culture.

He is also depicted as an elitist who believes that the offspring of Maoist revolutionaries are the rightful rulers of

China. His father was a major Communist leader who fought alongside Mao Zedong and helped implement Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms.

On human rights, the cables leave the question open. They note that Xi's father was critical of the military crackdown against Tiananmen Square protesters in





**THE PREMIERS:** A man walks past portraits (R-L) of China's President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, former President Jiang Zemin and late Chairman Mao Zedong by Chinese artist Ye Zhifu outside a gallery in Beijing, January 18, 2011. **REUTERS/JASON LEE**

1989 and that the Dalai Lama had "great affection" for the elder Xi.

The cables, which Reuters obtained through a third party, trace Xi's rapid rise from provincial official to national leader, covering a period from October 2006 to February 2010. They are based on conversations with numerous Chinese sources -- scholars, senior journalists, businessmen, relatives or friends of senior officials and the occasional government official.

There are very few fly-on-the-wall accounts of meetings with Xi or other top leaders, and none since he rose to national-level power in October 2007. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this cache of roughly 1,000 pages of cables is the window they provide into official U.S. efforts to size up Xi, the likely next leader of the world's most populous country, second largest economy and America's most important -- and complicated -- bilateral relationship.

What emerges is not a coherent biography. Rather, the documents contain granular details -- Xi likes Hollywood World War II movies for their "grand and truthful" tales of good versus evil, and wishes Chinese films would promote such values -- that the diplomats offer as potential insights into his character.

Aside from basic biographical information and background included to provide

necessary context, this report relies solely on the content of the cables.

### THE PRINCELING

#### WHO IS XI JINPING?

He was born in 1953 as the middle child of Xi Zhongxun, a first generation Chinese Communist revolutionary comrade of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, who rose to deputy prime minister.

As party boss in the southern province of Guangdong from 1978-80, the elder Xi (pronounced "she") implemented China's first experimental "economic zone" in Shenzhen, a key element of reforms that have propelled China from a dirt-poor land to an economic giant.

His status makes his son, in Chinese parlance, a "princeling": an informal grouping of an estimated 200-300 descendants from top Communist revolutionaries whose careers and fortunes are built largely on their family name.

Eventually, Xi's relatively liberal father fell victim to one of Mao's purges in the early 1960s. He was sent to the countryside and later jailed. His son, like many youth in his generation, was also "rusticated" -- sent down to the countryside -- for seven years. The punishment included farm work.

He joined the Communist Party in 1974, while his father was still in one of Mao's jails,



**FACING RIGHT:** U.S. President Barack Obama looks on as Chinese President Hu Jintao has a problem with his translation apparatus during a joint press conference in the East Room at the White House in Washington, January 19, 2011. **REUTERS/KEVIN LAMARQUE**

and steadily rose through its ranks. Xi joined the People's Liberation Army and worked as a secretary to the then defense minister while on active duty at the powerful Central Military Commission.

Xi studied chemical engineering at

Tsinghua University in Beijing from 1975-9 and then served a long stint as a party official in poor rural areas of Hebei, the northern province that surrounds Beijing.

From the mid-1980s, Xi then shifted to the fast-growing export powerhouse provinces and cities on China's southeastern coast. In quick succession he rose to the top of the government in Fujian, then Zhejiang province, becoming Communist Party secretary there in 2002.

In 2007, he was named party secretary in Shanghai, sent in to mop up after his predecessor was jailed and disgraced in a massive scandal over misuse of the city's social security funds. After a short stint in Shanghai, in the fall of 2007, Xi was elevated to the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party Central, ranking 6th on the elite nine-member group that rules China.

He was appointed China's vice-president in March 2008. In October 2010, he added an important political title seen as a strong indication that he will succeed Hu: Vice Chairman of the Communist Party's Central Military Commission.

**CABLES SKETCH CHINA'S SYSTEM**

HU JINTAO AND XI come off as competent and honest in comments by Chinese business, media and academic sources quoted in the cables.

"Hu was untouchable from the corruption standpoint in that he, his wife, his son and his daughter were all clean," the diplomats quoted a Chinese executive of a U.S. investment bank as saying.

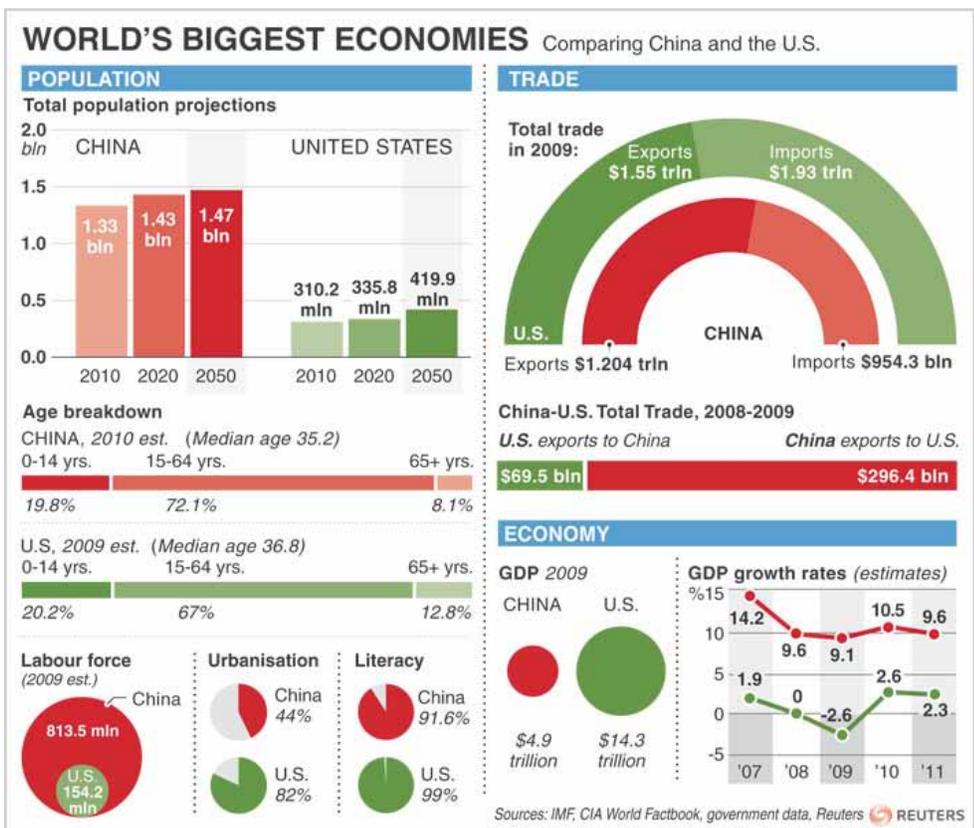
Xi was likewise referred to as "Mr Clean," having refused a 100,000 renminbi (\$15,180) bribe offer during his time working in Fujian province's port city of Xiamen, site of brazen smuggling scandals in the late 1990s.

"Xi has no need to risk taking bribes given the amount of money his wife, a famous singer, pulls in," said the investment banker. Xi's 48-year-old wife, Peng Liyuan, sings syrupy folk songs with a People's Liberation Army troupe.

In contrast to Xi, several retired senior leaders do not fare well in the cables.

The investment banker "noted that the base rate to purchase influence" with one powerful elder was around 500,000 renminbi (\$76,000 dollars), while it cost only 50,000 renminbi for influence with a retired minister of lower rank.

The men in question were associates of Hu's predecessor and party chief and state president, Jiang Zemin. Although retired and



CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION: Xi Jinping, Shanghai's Communist Party Secretary, attends the opening ceremony of the Ninth Shanghai Congress of the Communist Party May 24, 2007. REUTERS/STRINGER

in his 80s, Jiang's meddling and maneuvering to protect or promote his family and followers -- and Hu's efforts to rein in Jiang's influence -- are a theme of many 2006-7 cables.

In revenge for the sacking on corruption charges of Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Liangyu, Jiang's people tried to set up a minister regarded as a Hu protege with a woman but he refused the advances, said the investment banker. (Another source said the minister did have a relationship with the woman in question.)

Jiang's allies then tried get that woman to seduce the minister's son and arranged a transfer of 500,000 renminbi (\$76,000) into the son's bank account. "By the time the son realized that there was a large sum of money of unknown origins in his account, the matter had already been turned over to the Minister of public Security for investigation," read the cable.

They then forced the minister to resign as the price for closing his son's case, said the investment banker.

Relations at the party's top echelon are "akin to those in the executive suite of a large corporation, as determined by the interplay of powerful interests, or as shaped by competition between princelings with family ties to party elders and 'shopkeepers' who have risen through the ranks of the Party," said a cable from July 2009, citing conversations with a source with family connections to senior leaders.

Shopkeepers is a derogatory term the offspring of revolutionary leaders use to



**PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC:** A pro-democracy protester carries a mock coffin, symbolising those who died during the military crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989, during a protest urging for the release of political prisoners, outside the Chinese liaison office in Hong Kong October 1, 2010, as China celebrates the 61th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese characters on the mock coffin reads, "Butcher government stinks for 10,000 years". **REUTERS/TYRONE SIU**

describe those without elite party family backgrounds, a fellow princeling who befriended Xi as a teenager told diplomats.

"While my father was bleeding and dying for China, your father was selling shoelaces," the friend, who now lives outside China, quoted one of his peers as saying.

A senior Chinese journalist likened Hu to chairman of the board or CEO of a big company, where some issues are put to a vote, and others are discussed until consensus is reached. "Hu Jintao holds the most stock, so his views carry the greatest weight," said the journalist.

The party "should be viewed primarily as a collection of interest groups" with "no reform wing," a second well-connected journalist told the U.S. diplomats in December 2009. "China's top leadership had carved up China's economic pie, creating an ossified system in which vested interests drove decision-making and impeded reform as leaders maneuvered to ensure that those interests were not threatened," a diplomat wrote in a

synthesis of the journalists' views.

Retired, and in some cases active, leaders and their families had taken firm control of sectors such as electric power, oil, banking, real estate and precious gems and they opposed media openness, fearing the scrutiny this might bring to their activities, it said.

"The central feature of leadership politics was the need to protect oneself and one's family from attack after leaving office," said the cable.

"Ever since the 1989 Tiananmen protests and the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, a number of party elders have been pushing to place their progeny atop the party, believing that only their own offspring can be trusted to run the party," a diplomat wrote in a cable after conversations with a party think tank scholar.

Hu, a "shopkeeper" in the view of princelings, has run into resistance in trying to rebalance growth from the fast-growing coasts to the poorer inland provinces under

his otherwise uncontroversial policy platform, formally called the Scientific Development Concept.

The most important factor frustrating Hu is "the power of retired cadres and their princeling sons and daughters, many of whom have become China's vested interests, controlling major sectors of the economy and opposing the SDC, particularly its notion of redistributing wealth to more backward areas," said the party think tank scholar.

#### **AMBITION, CONNECTIONS, HUMILITY**

THE FRIEND WHO KNEW XI as a teenager was quoted by U.S. diplomats as describing Xi as "extremely pragmatic and a realist, driven not by ideology but by a combination of ambition and self-protection."

The friend, who shared Xi's background as the son of revolutionary leaders but moved abroad, said Xi had his "eye on the prize" from the very beginning and mapped out a career plan very early in his life.

The network and reputation of Xi's



**SUPER POWERS:** Chinese President Hu Jintao (R) shakes hands with U.S. Ambassador to China Clark Randt (L), as U.S. President George W. Bush (2nd R) and U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson watch, in Beijing August 10, 2008. **REUTERS/GUANG NIU/POOL**

father gave Xi broad support in the party. The misfortunes Mao's 1966-76 Cultural Revolution visited upon Xi's family did not alter his career choice or direction, the friend said, noting that Xi joined the party in 1974 while his father was still in prison.

Xi was exceptionally ambitious and, with "promotion to the center in mind from day one," chose to start his Party career in hardscrabble Hebei province as a calculated move to get experience in the Chinese countryside and broaden connections.

The friend told the U.S. diplomats that while many of Xi's peers became alienated from the Party as a result of the Cultural Revolution and mainly sought to enjoy life -- women, drinking, films -- Xi did none of those things.

"Unlike many youth who 'made up for lost time by having fun' after the Cultural Revolution, Xi 'chose to survive by becoming redder than red,'" the friend was quoted as saying.

Believing in the Party system as a way to survive, Xi studied Marxism and joined one of the worker-soldier-peasant revolutionary committees that sprung up during the Cultural Revolution.

Xi was of only average intelligence, and women thought Xi was boring. He could not discuss movies and did not drink, the friend said. While taciturn and hard to read, Xi could be outwardly friendly and was thought of as a "good guy" who knew the answers to everyone's questions and always took care of people, said the friend.

"Contacts say almost everyone 'likes'

*"CONTACTS SAY  
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EFFACING."*

Xi Jinping because unlike many other princelings, he is not 'arrogant' and instead is low-key, humble and self-effacing," said a November 2007 cable.

#### **FROM COASTAL PROVINCES TO SHANGHAI**

AFTER LAUNCHING HIS CAREER in the hinterlands of northern China, Xi moved to the southeastern coastal province of Fujian, across a narrow waterway from Taiwan.

Like Guangdong province where his father worked, Fujian was the site of early experiments with special economic zones and foreign investment and has been a big driver of China's export-led growth. Xi served 17 years in Fujian, rising to the rank of governor.

The WikiLeaks cables mention Xi's time in Fujian only in passing, noting that the province had a sister-state relationship to Oregon in the United States and trips there accounted for two of Xi's four visits to the

United States.

A Communist Party source told U.S. diplomats that Xi was "good on religion" in Fujian without elaborating and that Xi's father had some responsibility for religious affairs during his long career.

The friend who knew Xi as a teenager said Xi's time in Fujian meant that he had deep knowledge of Taiwan -- the self-governing island that China claims as sovereign territory and to whom the U.S. sells weapon, which is a major irritant in Sino-American ties. But another source in 2008 said Xi's expertise was limited to Taiwan-China business issues.

Xi's next post, Communist Party secretary of Zhejiang Province from 2002-7, put him in charge of another economic hotbed and export powerhouse coastal region.

The prominent role of the private sector and entrepreneurs in Zhejiang made it attractive to the United States and fostered close relations. Xi visited Zhejiang's U.S. sister-state, New Jersey, one cable noted.

The township of Zeguo in Zhejiang's Wenling city in 2005 introduced China's first experiment in deliberative polling, allowing selected citizens to weigh in through questionnaires and briefings on the funding of infrastructure projects.

Xi applauded this experiment during a visit that year, the cables reported.

A scholar at another Chinese think tank told U.S. diplomats in June 2006 that this experiment, limited though it was, indicated "princeling Xi was not as conservative as some paint him, but was actually reform-minded."

But another scholar in the same cable disagreed, saying by the time Xi was aware of the experiments they had "already proven successful and Xi had little alternative but to put his stamp of approval on them."

Embassy analysis in an October 2007 cable struck an optimistic tone about Xi's reformist qualities. Xi was "attentive to social security challenges, political reform and efforts to fight corruption," it said.

When Xi was party chief in Zhejiang, he told then U.S. Ambassador Clark Randt that he had urged the central government to maintain fast growth on the coast, so that increasing tax revenues could be used to develop poorer inland provinces.

"We are rich, but we cannot be unkind to the west ... as long as the cake gets bigger, we all get richer," the cable quoted Xi as saying.

But Xi told Randt in a March 2007 dinner at Randt's residence in Beijing that he was

opposed to efforts by Beijing to raise above the current 50 percent the level of fiscal revenue Zhejiang was required to send to the central government.

After a huge pension fund and stock manipulation scandals brought down the party leadership in Shanghai, implicating more than 50 officials, Hu had offered that commercial hub's party secretary position to several senior people including Xi, but they declined. Xi ended up taking the job briefly.

Nobody really wanted the post because of the career dangers involved in uprooting former President Jiang's Shanghai faction, sources told the diplomats.

A well-connected businessman in Shanghai said the city's scandal investigation was halted before it reached the highest levels and "it was increasingly clear to him that with the exception of Hu Jintao who remained incorrupt -- all senior Chinese leaders could be bought for the right price."

A professor in eastern China told U.S. diplomats Hu promoted some princelings, including Xi, in order to maintain good relations with party elders, whose role in politics was diminishing but who retained political influence.

A January 2007 cable quoted a local government researcher in Shanghai describing Xi as "very conservative like Hu" in ways that could affect the political atmosphere in the city.

By the time of an April 2007 cable, however, Xi was being described as "moderate to conservative" politically and embassy sources said he had a calming effect on Shanghai's politics.

Xi opened Shanghai's Party Congress in May 2007 to diplomats "for the first time in the collective memory of the Shanghai consular corps" and broadcast the session on local television in what a U.S. diplomat said appeared to be an effort at greater transparency.

### VIEWS THE UNITED STATES

U.S. DIPLOMATS' ACCOUNT of a September 29 meeting in Beijing between Xi and Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg recorded Xi as describing the United States and China as "not competitors but rather partners in cooperation."

He expressed a positive view of the United States and its people that dated back to his first visit to the country, an agriculture-related tour of Iowa in 1985, and he stressed the importance of people-to-people exchanges in building ties.

"Xi said he arrived with many questions, and after visiting small towns and spending time with local families, he had departed with an objective understanding of the United States," said the cable. "Xi remarked that he had been surprised that the peoples of the U.S. and China shared so many common interests," it added.

At a March 2007 dinner at Ambassador Randt's residence, Xi discussed his affection for Hollywood movies, the cable said. It mentioned "Saving Private Ryan" and "The Departed" as films Xi was particularly fond of, and quoted Xi as saying he was looking forward to seeing "Flags of Our Fathers."

"Xi said he particularly likes Hollywood

*"CONTACTS HAVE TOLD US HE IS HIGHLY REGARDED WITHIN THE PARTY AND HAS A BROADER BASE OF SUPPORT THROUGH DEMONSTRATED COMPETENCE IN RUNNING IMPORTANT COAST PROVINCES."*

movies about World War II and hopes Hollywood will continue to make them," said a cable on that dinner. "Hollywood makes those moves well, and such Hollywood movies are grand and truthful," the notes on the meeting said.

"Americans have a clear outlook on values and clearly demarcate between good and evil," Xi told the ambassador's party. In contrast, Xi said he found some recent popular Chinese movies "confusing" and too focused on palace intrigues or vulgar kung fu. He chastised unnamed Chinese directors saying some of them "neglect values they should promote."

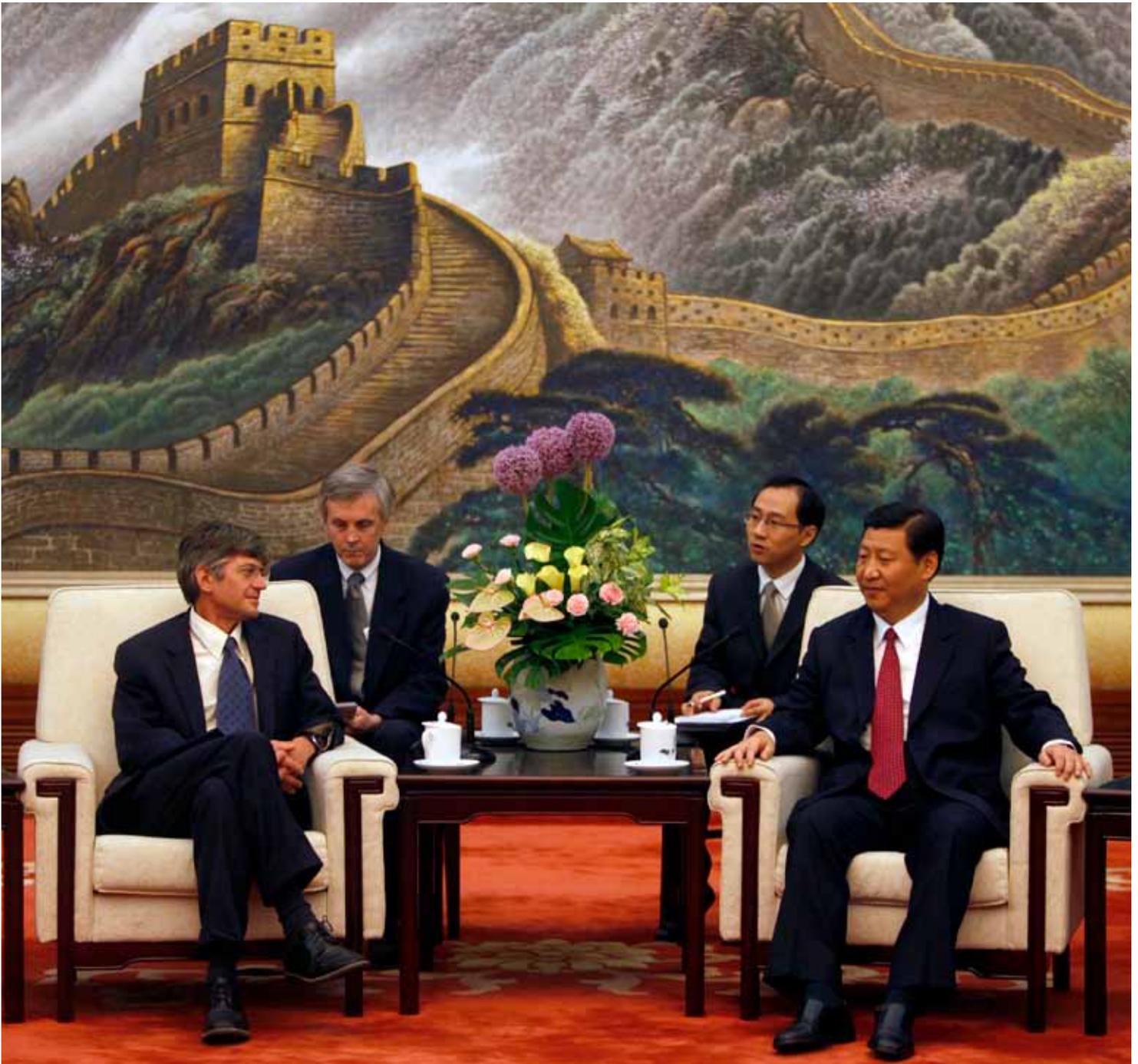
During a February 2009 visit to Mexico, Xi caused a ruckus with an undiplomatic outburst in remarks to a group of overseas Chinese. "There are some well-fed foreigners with nothing to do, who point to China and make unnecessary accusations," Xi was quoted as saying by Hong Kong newspapers in a report that was censored within China.

"First, China does not export revolution; second, we don't export hunger and poverty; and third, we don't make waves with you. What else can you say about us?" Xi said.

A cable on that episode by a U.S. diplomat in Mexico called the remarks "undiplomatic and unexpected" but assessed them as reflecting Xi's lack of maturity and not any policy view. Chinese media sources suggested to diplomats in Beijing that Xi's



RIVAL: China's Vice Premier Li Keqiang speaks during a China-Britain British Council Banquet at the Royal Courts of Justice, in central London January 11, 2011. REUTERS/BEN STANSALL/POOL



**FACE OF CHINA:** U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg (L) speaks with Chinese Vice Minister Xi Jinping during their meeting at Great Hall of the People in Beijing, September 29, 2009. REUTERS/ELIZABETH DALZIEL/POOL

statement was “calculated” and targeted China’s domestic audience, the cable said.

The friend who grew up with Xi told diplomats that he had “no ambition” to “confront” the United States and was generally favorably disposed to the country. After a 1987 visit to Washington, the friend noted, “although Xi was not particularly impressed by the United States, he had nothing bad to say about it either,” read a

November 2009 cable.

Xi’s older sister Xi An’an resided in Canada and his younger brother, Xi Yuanping, had moved to Hong Kong, while his ex-wife Ke Xiaoming, the daughter of China’s 1978-83 ambassador to London, lived in Britain, said the friend. He believed these personal experiences made Xi “very familiar with the West.”

### IS XI A REFORMER?

XI’S CAREER WAS SPENT largely in provinces known for economic openness, trade and rapid wealth creation, and in the case of Zhejiang, some modest tinkering with political reform at local levels. Xi’s late father’s legacy of reform and open-mindedness as an ally of liberal 1980s party chief Hu Yaobang has also boosted the image of Xi and raised hopes in many quarters that

he might be more liberal than the man he will one day replace.

The professor from eastern China “described Xi’s father as the most ‘open-minded’ leader under Deng Xiaoping” because he opposed actions taken by Deng to fire Hu and other party liberals in the late 1980s, wrote a U.S. diplomat. The elder Xi was also critical of the decision to use military force against the 1989 pro-democracy movement at Tiananmen, the record shows.

“Because of those stances by the elder Xi, many party liberals and intellectuals are favorably disposed towards Xi Jinping,” said the professor.

One cable notes that Chinese bloggers, who at times faced heavy censorship, placed hope in Xi as more forward-thinking and practical than Hu, who has overseen a tightening of controls on the Internet.

A February 2010 cable, based on the views of a dissident writer, quotes him as saying that “the Dalai Lama still had great affection for Xi’s late father ... and continued to cherish a watch Xi gave him in the 1950s.”

The friend who grew up with Xi describes him in his Fujian days as fascinated by

Buddhist mysticism and qigong breathing exercises, but says it was not clear if Xi was religious or just looking for ways to maintain his health.

Summarizing some less flattering views of Xi’s performance, several Shanghai scholars are quoted in a mid-2007 cable as saying Xi’s accomplishments in Zhejiang and Shanghai were the result of “doing nothing” and trying “not to mess things up” in those thriving regions.

Describing Xi’s elevation to the Politburo Standing Committee, the investment banker said “Xi is very bland -- the most colorless of the candidates -- and was therefore the easiest compromise.”

Other informants also insist that Xi’s upbringing among the ruling elite is the best indicator of his attitudes. “Party elders were primarily concerned with having someone ‘conservative’ like Xi in place who will not threaten their ‘vested interests,’” said the journalist with family ties to the leadership.

“Our contact is convinced that Xi has a genuine sense of ‘entitlement,’ believing that members of his generation are the ‘legitimate heirs’ to the evolutionary achievements of

their parents and therefore ‘deserve to rule China,’” said a long November 2009 cable summarizing two years of conversations with the friend who was close to Xi during their youth.

“Xi also does not care at all about money and is not corrupt,” reads that cable, adding that the source “wryly noted” that Xi could afford to be incorruptible “given that he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth.”

The friend maintains, however, that “Xi knows how very corrupt China is and is repulsed by the all-encompassing commercialization of Chinese society, with its attendant nouveau riche, official corruption, loss of values, dignity and self-respect, and such ‘moral evils’ as drugs and prostitution,” says the cable.

When Xi takes the helm of the party, he might “aggressively attempt to address those evils, perhaps at the expense of the new moneyed class,” the friend speculates.

(\$1=6.58 renminbi)

(Additional reporting by Mark Hosenball, Andrew Quinn, Phil Stewart and Susan Cornwell; editing by Jim Impoco and Claudia Parsons)



**SUMMIT POLITICS:** U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (3rd L) and China’s Vice President Xi Jinping (3rd R) sit with members of their delegation during their meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing January 10, 2011. **REUTERS/LARRY**

**COVER PHOTO:** U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (L) shakes hands with China’s Vice President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing January 10, 2011. **REUTERS/LARRY DOWNING**

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