

FRONTLINE

Volume 29 - Issue 11 :: Jun. 02-15, 2012
INDIA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE
from the publishers of THE HINDU

Chinese concerns

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The Obama administration is exerting pressure on China on a host of issues ranging from domestic human rights to territorial disputes.

CHINA these days is buffeted by a slew of problems, many of them orchestrated from abroad. The United States has been getting increasingly edgy as it sees China emerging as a serious world power. At this juncture, the economies of the two countries are too closely intertwined for open hostilities to break out. China is often described as America's "top banker". As the crisis in capitalism engulfs the world, the two biggest economies of the world need each other. All the same, the Obama administration is exerting pressure on China on a host of issues ranging from domestic human rights to territorial disputes in the South China Sea and beyond.

The Dalai Lama and his international backers have been trying to bring the spotlight back on to the Tibet issue. There have been since last year a series of suicides inside China by monks and supporters owing allegiance to the Tibetan spiritual leader. The Chinese government has said that the Dalai Lama has not made any effort to dissuade the most fanatical of his supporters from periodically immolating themselves. In early May, the spiritual leader of the Tibetans told a British tabloid that the Chinese authorities had hatched a plan to assassinate him in his headquarters in Dharamsala. Even the Western media did not give much credence to the allegation. The Dalai Lama claimed that Chinese agents masquerading as female devotees had tried to poison him.

The more long-term threats to the Chinese political establishment stem from internal divisions in the Communist Party and rising activism from Western-backed civil society groups. With a new collective leadership all set to take over next year, the political ripples that became visible earlier in the year have the potential to adversely impact the decision-making process.

Rise and fall of Bo

The epicentre was in Chongqing, which was run by the charismatic Bo Xilai. Bo's father, Bo Yibo, is one of the "eight immortals" of the Chinese revolution. Bo was part of the new generation of leaders widely tipped to occupy important positions of power. Many of China's new leaders are children of old revolutionaries and have been described as "red princelings".

The man widely tipped to take over as China's next leader, Xi Jinping, is also a son of a revolutionary leader, Xi Zhongsun, who, along with Mao Zedong and others, was a hero of the epochal "Long March". These senior figures along with their children had fallen into disfavour during the Cultural Revolution and were sent to do hard labour in the then impoverished countryside. After the Cultural Revolution, described as "ten years of calamities" in today's China, the country gradually started shifting from the socialist economic model, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping.

Bo's claim to fame was his reputation as an able and ideologically motivated administrator. He first emerged in the national and international spotlight after bringing about remarkable changes in Dalian, which was his earlier posting. His reputation as an able administrator was further refurbished in Chongqing. Both these regions are among the fastest growing in China. Bo, in contrast to the more staid members of the Politburo, tried to portray himself as a neo-Maoist, repeatedly railing against the dangers of uninhibited economic liberalism.

Under him, Chongqing experienced a revival of Mao era revolutionary songs and slogans. Bo launched there a "praise the red, strike the black" anti-corruption campaign, ensuring for it prime-time coverage on the media channels he controlled. More than 800 "mobsters" were put on trial and many of them executed. These criminals, reportedly having links with local officials, had a free run before Bo came on the scene in Chongqing. Bo also introduced reforms aimed at ensuring that ordinary people got tangible benefits from the "real estate" boom. The Chongqing administration under Bo earmarked \$15 billion for the construction of 800,000 apartments for low-income groups.

Bo had initiated key reforms in Chongqing's market economy, though he was later accused of trying to bring back some of the characteristics of the "Cultural Revolution" which swept China in the 1960s and early 1970s. The Chongqing model is an ideological contrast to the Guangdong model favoured by most in the Communist Party establishment in Beijing. The former emphasises the importance of state-owned enterprises, while the latter stands for continued economic liberalisation. But the Guangdong model has resulted in growing disparity between the top 10 per cent of the population and the rest. However, almost everybody agrees that living standards in China have gone up and hundreds of millions of people have risen out of poverty since the mid-1980s.

The events that led to Bo's sudden downfall are still shrouded in mystery. The downhill slide started when a senior Chongqing police official and the city's Vice-Mayor, Wang Lijun, sought refuge in the local U.S. Consulate on February 6. On March 14, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao made a speech harshly critical of the Chongqing administration. The next day, Bo was removed from his post. Soon, he was suspended from the Politburo and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Until late last year, Bo was considered a shoo-in for a seat on the highest decision-making body of the Communist Party, the nine-member Standing Committee of the CPC.

Wang was later allowed to leave for Beijing under police escort after he was debriefed by American diplomats. Chinese bloggers have reported that he provided a treasure trove of information to the Americans, including details of business dealings involving families of top Chinese officials, including that of Bo and Premier Wen Jiabao.

Things started unravelling for Bo immediately. His wife, Gu Kailai, was put under investigation and later arrested for her alleged involvement in the murder of a British businessman, Neil Heywood. Heywood, who reputedly had connections with the British intelligence, was found dead in a Chongqing hotel under mysterious circumstances. It was reported at the time that the entrepreneur had died of a heart attack. Now, the authorities have said that he was murdered at Gu's behest.

The whole incident has been used by the Western media to tarnish the image of the Communist Party as the country faces new challenges triggered by the global financial meltdown. At the same time it is evident, as illustrated by recent events, that there are ideological differences in the top echelons of the CPC.

A dissident's saga

Another person who took refuge in the American embassy was the Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng. The blind lawyer, a crusader against China's one-child policy who was under house arrest in north-eastern China, managed to evade his minders and found his way to the U.S. embassy in Beijing. His action was evidently timed to coincide with the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Beijing. Chen had reluctantly left the embassy premises after the Chinese authorities said that no action would be taken against him for breaking the law. But he later changed his mind and said that he wanted to leave for the U.S. with his wife and two children.

The Chinese authorities, though clearly unhappy with the American role in the entire episode, were quick to grant Chen and his family the necessary permission to leave the country. "It is not such good conduct on the part of the U.S. government in poking its nose into Chinese affairs in ways Americans would not tolerate them doing to us," wrote an American columnist, Bruce Ramsey, in *The Seattle Times*. He noted that this was the second such interference in the internal affairs of China in recent months.

The Chinese government has demanded an apology for the latest incident involving Chen. It is evident that the anti-government activist received outside help in escaping from his residence located more than 300 km from Beijing. *The New York Times* reported that an American embassy car was used to rush Chen to the safety of the diplomatic mission.

Counterweight to China

On the foreign front, China is gearing up to meet the new threats emerging at its doorstep. In 2011, The Pentagon concluded that China's "modernised military could be put to use in ways that encourage China's ability to gain diplomatic advantage or resolve disputes in its favour". The Obama administration is now working overtime to build new military alliances and revive old ones as a counterweight to China. As it is, the U.S. outspends nine to one against China in defence. Beijing poses no threat to American national interests. "The issue is Washington's ability to project force along China's borders and enforce its will on China," wrote Doug Bandow, a senior Fellow at the Cato Institute in the U.S.

During his visit to Australia in November last year, Barack Obama pledged to make America's "presence and missions in the Asia-Pacific a top priority". The U.S. President had announced the permanent stationing of 2,500 U.S. troops in Australia.

Two years ago, the then U.S. Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, had said at a conference in Singapore that a U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region is needed for "deterring, and if necessary defeating, potential adversaries". The American strategy revolves around the control of strategic sea routes through which China gets its energy supplies from West Asia and Africa.

The Obama administration has sided with the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea and other nations in the region in their territorial disputes with China relating to tiny islands and rocky outposts. Hillary Clinton declared last year that the U.S. had a "national interest" in the regional disputes that had erupted in the South China Sea.

In the Philippines, the U.S. Army has made a comeback after being forced to vacate its military bases. The current Philippine President, Benigno Aquino Jr, has re-embraced the U.S. militarily. The American military has been given full access to the Subic military base.

The Philippines had terminated the "Bases" treaty with the U.S. in 1991. The Americans were forced to leave the big military bases of Clark and Subic. Now there is an attempt by the Obama administration, which has significantly expanded the number of U.S. bases around the world, to enter through the back door. A senior American military official said that under the defence agreement between the two countries, the U.S. is obliged to "get involved" in the defence of Philippine sovereignty.

Recently, the navies of the two countries staged an exercise near a disputed oil rig in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is rich in oil and gas reserves. Chinese and Philippine naval forces have been involved in a tense standoff near the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, which began in the middle of April. The Obama administration had encouraged the Philippine government to adopt an aggressive posture on the small group of disputed rocks jutting out of the sea. During her recent visit to Manila, Hillary Clinton went out of her way to fuel jingoistic feelings in the Philippines, going to the extent of describing the South China Sea as the "West Philippines Sea". She reiterated that in the event of any military confrontation, the U.S. "would be in the Philippines corner".

Encircling militarily

In its anti-China stratagems, the U.S. seems to have garnered more allies than during the Cold War days. India and Vietnam, for instance, given their previous run-ins with China on border issues, are not discouraging the U.S. in its plans to encircle China militarily. India has held joint military exercises with Western navies in the Indian Ocean region. Vietnam signed a military agreement with the U.S. last year, in spite of the lingering scars left behind by the long war the two countries fought.

A prominent American establishment think tank, the Centre for a New American Society, concluded in a recent publication that "Nationalism in South China Sea countries... may be the best basis for stitching together common interest in a loose, almost invisible network of like-minded and increasingly capable maritime states that are willing to deflect Chinese hegemony." The U.S. is busy hatching new plans to derail China's "peaceful rise" to superpower status as its own status as the sole superpower is fast eroding.