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Sent: Friday, September 14, 2012 2:01 PM
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Subject: Fwd: Chinese potential power struggle could be the most important world event of the year

Off-Script Scramble for Power in a Chinese Leader = Absence

By IAN JOHNSON and JOATHAN ANSFIELD

Published: September 13, 2012

BEIJING — With still no sign of =>

<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/china/index.html?inline=nyt-geo> title="More news and information about China." style="color: blue; text-decoration: underline;">China's designated new leader, Xi Jinping http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/x/xi_jinping/index.html?inline=nyt-per , who has not been seen in public since Sept. 11 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/11/world/asia/xi-jinping-chinas-presumptive-new-leader-mysteriously-absent.html> , many insiders and well-connected analysts say the Chinese political ship is adrift, with factions jockeying to shape an impending Communist Party conclave.

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Pool photo by How Hwee Yung

Xi Jinping on Aug. 29. Some analysts believe he has had a heart attack or stroke.

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The government has maintained its o=ficial silence about Mr. Xi's absence. After an initial burst of ch=ttter, blog posts alluding to Mr. Xi have been effectively smothered on Chin='s social media platforms, and China's beleaguered Foreign M=nistry spokesman says on a daily basis that he has no information, despite a=barrage of questions from the foreign news media.

By Thursday, a number of ranking party members w=th years of experience following Chinese politics were generally in a=reement that Mr. Xi, 59, had suffered either a mild heart attack or a strok=, forcing him to cancel his appointments.

"The most reliable information we can find is th=t it's his heart," said a senior Chinese newspaper editor w=o spoke only on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of th= issue among the party hierarchy. Li Weidong, a former editor of a governme=t-sponsored reformist journal, agreed.

On Thursday, Mr. Xi's name appeared in the Chinese p=ess for the first time in days,as he offered c=ndolences <http://www.gx.chinanews.com/2012/=910_0912/62812.html> over the recent death of a veteran party member. B=t that terse report only mentioned him among several leaders and did not im=ly anything more than a formal expression of sorrow.

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=lanned years in advance, the 18th Party Congress is sla=ed to be the most sweeping government reorganization <<http://www=nytimes.com/2012/08/07/world/asia/reports-signal-gathering-of-chinese-leade=s-ahead-of-transition.html>> in a d=cade, with scores of leaders scheduled to retire. It was still expected to t=ke place next month or soon after in Beijing, where Mr. Xi was to take over=as leader from Hu Jintao. The Communist Party has numerous factions, but th= overall framework of the transfer was thought to have been mostly ironed o=t over the past year.

=ut recent developments, including Mr. Xi's mysterious cancellation o= several public appearances, suggest that may not be the case.</=pan>

The most obvious sign of discord is=that the dates for the congress have not been set. Most political experts h=re expected it to be held in mid-October, but without an official announcem=nt, some are predicting it will be delayed.

"We hear that the congress will be held in late=October or early November," a security official from southern China=said. "Currently we're planning for that."

One reason for the delay, the ex=erts say, is what now appears to have been acontentious meeting in e=rly August <<http://www.nytimes.c=m/2012/07/22/world/asia/chinas-communist-elders-take-backroom-intrigue-beac=side.html>> at the seaside resort of Beidaihe, China. Accord=ng to the official script, this was to have been the final big meeting befo=e the congress of leaders from the party's various factions: the mi=itary, big state enterprises, descendants of revolutionary families, leader= of critical Communist Party organizations and others. The details of the c=ngress were to be finalized at Beidaihe and the dates announced later in Au=ust.

Instead, according to information that is slowly leaking out, the Beidaihe meeting and other sessions beforehand in Beijing were especially tense <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/02/world/asia/party-intrigue-seen-in-chinese-officials-apparent-demotion.html>. The atmosphere was very bad, and the struggles were very intense, said a political analyst with connections to the party's nerve center, the General Office.

Mr. Hu, who has been criticized as having been an overly cautious and ineffective leader during his decade in power, was also seen as defensive and gloomy.

A veteran party scholar who attended the Beidaihe meetings said the leaders only met over a couple of days and finalized a list of more than 2,000 delegates to the congress whose names were already public. A proposed list of new leaders was not circulated, however, and there was no deliberation of critical issues, like drafts of the political blueprints to be unveiled at the congress, he said.

"We thought that these issues would be settled there," he said, "but they weren't."

Given the absence of hard information from the government, it is possible that Mr. Xi's absence has been caused by something other than illness. The veteran party scholar, who dined late last week with a close family member of Mr. Xi's, said the relative told him he did not know Mr. Xi to be sick. The scholar maintained that Mr. Xi's absence was more likely because of the unsettled political situation.

"There is still a struggle; it is not finished," he said.

Most insiders say that they still expect Mr. Xi to re-emerge soon and take over the top positions in the party and the government roughly on schedule. Two party academics who advise the government said Mr. Xi could make a speech this weekend. Almost all the insiders said he should be healthy in time to participate fully in the Congress.

But if Mr. Xi's sudden absence has been caused by a serious illness, it raises the question of whether he will be strong enough to serve the two five-year terms expected of him when he emerged in 2007 as a compromise candidate to lead the party.

"This would be the worst-case scenario," said a senior official in a government research group with close ties to the central government. "It would require a complete rebalancing of all the competing interests."

This is not to say that the transition has ground to a halt. Most of those who closely follow China's party politics are predicting that the powerful Standing Committee of the Politburo will be reduced to seven from nine members in an effort to streamline decision-making, resolve factional fighting over seats and rein in the power of China's well-financed law enforcement apparatus. In addition, most seem to agree on all but one or two members of the probable leadership lineup.

Not all, however, believe that this plan is set in stone. The party scholar who attended the Beidaihe retreat said he had not seen any evidence confirming whether the Standing Committee would have seven or nine members.

Some see the uncertainty as reflecting Mr. Hu's desire to retain influence for as long as possible. It is unclear, for example, how long Mr. Hu will stay on as leader of the Central Military Commission, a job that effectively makes him commander in chief. His predecessor, Jiang Zemin, retained that post for two years after stepping down as party secretary, but it appeared for a while that Mr. Hu might bow to pressure to give that position to Mr. Xi to help the new leader consolidate power.

Jane Perlez contributed reporting.

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