

Hu warns of Western Ideological Infiltration

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What colour scarf for China?

Alarmed by the recent success of American interference in the political affairs of other nations, including Russia, the Chinese Communist Party is adopting a defence strategy against what it calls 'cultural and ideological infiltration.'



Hu Jintao

HONG KONG - The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) greeted 2012 by publicizing a speech by its general secretary, President Hu Jintao that called for effective measures against "ideological and cultural infiltration" by "hostile forces".

Hu's remarks on cultural infiltration appeared in a lengthy speech given to a party plenum in October, with the unusually toughly-worded rhetoric taking many in and outside China by surprise. Some foreign media saw it as a declaration of war against Western culture.

The speech reminded some Chinese intellectuals of campaigns against "(Western) spiritual pollution" and "bourgeois liberalization" in the 1980s that eventually led to the Tiananmen protests and subsequent crackdown in 1989. Some have read Hu's statement as a signal that Beijing will tighten ideological controls to suppress dissenting voices.

Hu's speech was published by Seeking Truth, the CCP's flagship magazine run by the Central Party School, in its first issue of 2012. The warning was contained in the following text (translated and highlighted by this author):

Internationally, a remarkable feature of the competitiveness of a nation's comprehensive strength is how prominent its cultural status and role would be.

Many countries, especially big countries, all set as an important strategy to strengthen their cultural soft power. In today's world, as exchange, integration and confrontation between all kinds of thoughts and cultures become ever increasingly frequent, whoever can take hold of a cultural commanding point obtains strong cultural soft power and thus

will gain the initiative.

At the same time, we must clearly see that international hostile forces are stepping up their strategic attempts to Westernize and divide our country, and ideological and cultural fields are a focus of their long-term infiltration. We must be clearly aware of the seriousness and complicatedness of struggles in ideological fields, always remain alert and always heighten our vigilance, and take effective countermeasures ...

This is perhaps the first time since Hu took power nine years ago that he has openly expressed Beijing's concern about a so-called "peaceful evolution". The concept was formulated during the Cold War by John Foster Dulles, former US secretary of state, in the 1950s. It envisioned a "peaceful" transition from autocracy or dictatorship to democracy in a communist country.

Since the Mao Zedong-era, the CCP has resisted a "peaceful evolution", viewing such a transition as the biggest threat to its continuous rule. For CCP leaders, nothing is more important than safeguarding party rule. This is why led Deng Xiaoping ordered People's Liberation Army troops to evacuate Tiananmen Square in 1989. Hu is simply reiterating the party line.

If Hu's statement is read as a declaration of cultural war, then obviously that war on China's part is defensive. Hu's warning is directed domestically. Having survived the "domino effect" of the collapse of the former Soviet bloc in late 1980s and early 1990s, the CCP was once again reminded of the threat of "peaceful evolution" by the Jasmine Revolution and last year's Arab Spring movement in Middle East and North Africa.

After more than 30 years of capitalist-style economic reforms, China has become a more open society than ever before. The CCP may also be finding it increasingly hard to justify the legitimacy of its continuous rule as calls for democratization become louder.

However, Hu's warning is better understood against the backdrop of the CCP's 18th National Congress, which when held later this year will endorse a new central leadership.

It is a long-term task for the CCP to fight against "peaceful evolution". But Hu will step down as party general secretary. So his statement could also be read as: "During my tenure, I have successfully safeguarded party rule against the threat of 'peaceful evolution'. I hope the new leadership will continue to do so."

The CCP needs to maintain political and social stability ahead of the 18th congress to ensure that the power transition goes smoothly. It has been reported that Beijing has ordered regions to take all necessary measures to prevent any incident from happening before and during the congress that could cause instability.

Beijing has tightened Internet controls in the name of curbing rumors - in the CCP's history, rumors have always flown during a power transition. In this regard, the party's secrecy policy must take some blame. In the absence of official information, people chase after hearsay. But Beijing apparently believes that some rumors will be deliberately fabricated overseas in an attempt to influence the party congress.

Ahead of the congress, many Chinese-language books have been published in Hong Kong - and more are expected - about who will be the new leaders and their background, or about fierce power struggles among different factions. Not many local residents are interested in reading such books. Such publications mainly cater to the taste of mainland Chinese visitors, who arrive in their tens of

thousands daily. Needless to say, much of the writing is based speculation. But now Chinese customs have stepped up checks to prevent travelers from taking such books back to the mainland.

This is an example of how Beijing has stepped up efforts to fight against ideological and cultural infiltration by "international hostile forces".

Despite this, fears that Hu may launch a nationwide campaign to tighten ideological control may not be based on fact; times have changed.

Not many people, including party members, would be interested in such a campaign nowadays. So it would be hard for Hu to do it even if he wanted. More importantly, he will step down as general secretary some months later. It is unlikely he would want to upset the political and social atmosphere before his retirement, as any radical change in major policy would be deemed "unharmonious" for a smooth power transition.

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