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## *China's Leader, Ex-Rival at Side, Solidifies Power*

By JOSEPH KAHN

BEIJING, Sept. 24 — Three years after becoming China's top leader, Hu Jintao has solidified his grip on power and intimidated critics inside and outside the Communist Party with the help of the man once seen as his most potent rival.

Mr. Hu, China's president and Communist Party chief, and Zeng Qinghong, vice president and the man in charge of the party's organizational affairs, have tackled the most delicate domestic and foreign policy issues as a team, governing as hard-liners with a deft political touch, former Chinese officials and scholars with leadership connections said.

Their bond is a surprise because Mr. Zeng was the longtime right-hand man of the previous No. 1 leader, Jiang Zemin. A skillful backroom political operator considered to have strong military ties, Mr. Zeng was long viewed as the only person capable of challenging Mr. Hu for power.

Instead, Mr. Zeng and Mr. Hu joined forces last year to push Mr. Jiang to retire and to give up his position as leader of China's military, party insiders said. That cleared the way for Mr. Hu to become military chief and weakened the formidable political network Mr. Jiang had constructed in his 13 years at the helm.

Their alliance has shored up the Communist Party as it faces enor-

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mous stresses, including simmering social unrest and an uphill struggle to curtail corruption. They have quieted talk of serious factional splits and paved the way for Mr. Hu to impose his orthodox, repressive stamp on Chinese politics.

Mr. Hu and Mr. Zeng made back-to-back addresses at a secretive party conclave in May to promote a "smokeless war" against "liberal elements" in society that they contended were supported by the United States, said people who said they had been told about the speeches. They have also clamped down on nongovernmental organizations, tightened media controls and forced all of the 70 million Communist Party members to submit self-criticisms as an act of ritualistic submission to their authority.

At the same time, Mr. Hu and Mr. Zeng have taken bold and unexpect-

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## ***Strong leaders unite to shore up a Communist Party facing social unrest and corruption.***

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ed steps. They courted opposition political parties in rival Taiwan, plunged deeply into Hong Kong's political affairs and agreed to commemorate a late Communist Party leader popular among some liberals.

Cooperation between the men may be temporary, some knowledgeable about the party said, but the consensus among those who follow leadership affairs is that the two have decided they have more to gain by working together than by pursuing rival agendas.

"With Hu and Zeng working together, the leadership is very strong and hard-line," said one person with high-level connections. "I think China can maintain stability as long as they are together." Like others interviewed for this article, this person asked not to be identified because the authorities often punish people who speak publicly about high-level politics.

On paper, Mr. Hu, 62, has enormous authority on his own. He was anointed the future leader by Deng Xiaoping in 1992 at the relatively

young age of 49. He then had a decade to cultivate allies before his formal accession in 2002.

Even so, he was never a part of Mr. Jiang's Shanghai-linked faction that held sway over the country since the mid-1990's. He now presides over the Politburo Standing Committee, the country's top governing body, that was expanded to include nine men, at least five of whom owed their promotions mainly to Mr. Jiang.

Mr. Hu also lacks deep ties in the military and the government bureaucracy, having risen through the party ranks in China's western region. He had virtually no public persona before assuming the top titles, and since then has presented a cardboard, dogmatic face to the world, generating little enthusiasm among the Chinese people.

He has emphasized collective decision making, submitting his proposed speeches, travels and major meetings to a formal vote of the Politburo. Mr. Zeng's influence may have increased more than that of any of the other top leaders.

Mr. Zeng, 66, has a very different political résumé. He owes his rise mainly to Mr. Jiang. The elder leader valued Mr. Zeng's military ties — Mr. Zeng's father was a revolutionary army commander and his brother is a senior military officer — and the skill Mr. Zeng displayed during the political battles Mr. Jiang faced until late in his reign. Party officials credit Mr. Zeng with helping to eclipse several of Mr. Jiang's political and military rivals.

Mr. Zeng also appears to have some clout among Westernized party officials, and China's class of wealthy entrepreneurs and the children of the party elite. He has taken a greater interest in China's ties with the United States than Mr. Hu has. He even plays tennis with Clark T. Randt Jr., the United States ambassador to China.

Mr. Zeng assumed control of the party's day-to-day organizational affairs in 1999 and was later made vice president and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee. That prompted speculation that Mr. Zeng might someday make a bid for the top leadership posts himself and that he would seek to keep Mr. Hu in check in the meantime.

The pressure, however, fell more on Mr. Jiang, now fully retired at age 79.

In the summer of 2004, Mr. Jiang, who had retained control over China's military after handing off his other titles to Mr. Hu, was viewed as competing with Mr. Hu for influence and creating a potentially dangerous rift in the power structure.



Goh Chai Hin/Agence France-Presse

President Hu Jintao of China, center, and Vice President Zeng Qinghong at a conference in Beijing in March. They have sought a "smokeless war" against "liberal elements" that they have said were backed by America.

In one version of what followed, Mr. Zeng suggested to Mr. Jiang that he offer to resign ahead of the party's annual planning session that September. He implied that the resignation offer, which he suggested would be rejected by Mr. Jiang's loyalists on the Politburo, could clear the air and give Mr. Jiang a fresh mandate to retain his control over the military.

Mr. Jiang did something similar two years earlier, before an important party congress, and the tactic worked.

This time it did not. Mr. Hu, acting as vice chairman of the military commission, circulated Mr. Jiang's resignation among the military brass instead of the Politburo. Many military officers wanted to see the leadership transition completed and rallied around Mr. Hu as their new civilian leader. Mr. Jiang's resignation was then presented to the Politburo as a fait accompli.

Mr. Jiang, sidelined at his retreat in the Fragrant Hills outside Beijing, was described as furious and tearful when he realized he had been outmaneuvered.

Whether or not Mr. Jiang's departure resulted from a plot, the relationship between Mr. Hu and Mr.

Zeng grew closer, party insiders said.

"I think they both have a special ability to wage political battles," said one person who has studied the events leading to Mr. Jiang's retirement. "They may have seen how much they could get done by working together."

Mr. Hu now relies on Mr. Zeng to manage crises, much as Mr. Jiang once did.

It was Mr. Zeng who oversaw the arrangements for the funeral of Zhao Ziyang, the party chief who became a hero to many government critics for opposing the leadership's decision to forcibly suppress the Beijing democracy protests in 1989. Mr. Zhao was purged and spent 15 years under house arrest before he died in January.

Mr. Zhao was given a public funeral and was buried in the elite Babaoshan cemetery in Beijing. But Mr. Zeng mobilized a huge police force and kept dissidents under house arrest during the event to prevent protests.

Just one month later, he and Mr. Hu sought to soften the repressive atmosphere that surrounded the funeral by agreeing to commemorate another fallen party chief, Hu Yao-

bang. The former party chief, who is not related to Mr. Hu, the president, lost power in 1987 and was remembered as a proponent of faster political change.

In February, President Hu visited Li Zhao, the widow of the former party chief, and told her that the party planned to commemorate her husband's achievements, said several people who said they had been told

about the visit. They said it showed how President Hu and Mr. Zeng wanted to guard against accusations that they had ignored the contributions of their elders.

"It was a delicate balancing act to ensure stability," one person said.

Perhaps the biggest area of cooperation between Mr. Hu and Mr. Zeng has been rolling back what they argued had been a dangerous trend toward liberalization in the media and civil society.

In May, Mr. Hu and Mr. Zeng convened top officials to warn that just as governments in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan had been toppled, the government in China could be, too. They argued that the United States had fostered social unrest in those places and had similar designs on China, said people who said they had been told about the speeches.

They have since forced nongovernment organizations that focus on the environment, legal aid, health and education to find government sponsors or shut down. Many groups are also under pressure to stop accepting money from the United States and other foreign countries.

The leadership has also fired editors at publications that defied orders from the party's Propaganda Department, including, most recently, the bosses of the elite Workers' Daily newspaper and its associated publishing house, party insiders said. They have also tightened rules on foreign investment in China's television industry.

Although campaigns against China's increasingly diverse media happen periodically without lasting effect, several observers said the latest crackdown had been waged with an intensity that suggested that top leaders were paying more attention to the issue than they had in the past decade.