

'Mr. Fix-It': China's new Vice President has tackled thorniest of crises

18/03/2018 09:09 by admin

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Wang Qishan takes the oath of office after being elected as vice president

Wang Qishan is known as China's "Mr. Fix-It," a trustworthy official deployed to tackle the thorniest of crises from crumbling banks to deadly illness to high-level corruption. Those who've met him describe him as bold and probing, a problem solver who enjoys philosophical debates and has a wicked sense of humor.

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Wang is known for integrity and competence, but his appointment Saturday by the ceremonial legislature, in a pro-forma vote of 2,969 to 1, was widely regarded as unconventional.

To keep Wang past retirement age, Xi had him step down from the Politburo Standing Committee while ensconcing him in what had been a relatively meaningless ceremonial post.

That stands to diminish the influence of the others on the seven-member committee, including Xi's rival, Premier Li Keqiang, ostensibly China's second-most powerful official particularly if Wang is handed important tasks giving him authority over their affairs.

"Definitely, this will further marginalize Li Keqiang," said University of Miami Chinese politics expert June Teufel Dreyer. "Having amassed so much power, it's to be expected that Xi wants a lieutenant in whom he has complete trust."

While Wang's specific duties have yet to be spelled out, under China's constitution, he would take over as head of state should Xi be unable to fulfill his duties. Unconfirmed reports also say he will be permitted to attend high-level meetings, including those of the Politburo Standing Committee, as a non-voting observer.

Tellingly, Wang has also been seen at events such as Saturday's ceremony at the Great Hall of the People, seated in eighth place in the order of hierarchy, just after the seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee.

Wang shares aspects of Xi's background, and the two appear very much in agreement on the need for firm party rule and strict discipline to guide China's economic development.

The two are believed to have first met while serving as sent-down youths in impoverished Shaanxi province during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution. Wang, five years older than the 64-year-old Xi, left first for university and later conducted research on 19th and 20th century Chinese history at a state academy.

His marriage to the daughter of a rising political leader granted him the "princeling" status enjoyed by relatives of the Communist elite. Wang's fortunes rose with those of his father-in-law, Yao Yilin, who as first vice premier strongly backed the bloody military crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in 1989.

Wang soon showed a particular talent for dealing with stricken state financial vehicles. In one notable triumph, he was praised for helping shield China from the aftershocks of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, after which he was named party secretary of the booming island province of Hainan.

His crisis-management skills were in demand again when a mystery respiratory illness was identified. During the deadly 2003 SARS outbreak, Wang was named mayor of Beijing, where he helped quell panic by ordering quarantines and daily public updates.

Wang was then handed responsibility for preparing the city for the 2008 Summer Olympics and, after being named a vice premier, Shanghai's 2010 World Expo.

He is perhaps best known, however, for being Xi's enforcer following his 2012 elevation to the Politburo Standing Committee, charged with carrying out a sweeping crackdown on corruption as head of the party's watchdog body that has seen some 1.5 million party members punished, including life sentences for a former Politburo Standing Committee member and a top general.

Partly as a result of that work, Wang has maintained a relatively low public profile over recent years.

Yet he raised eyebrows in September with a 90-minute meeting with President Donald Trump's former adviser Steve Bannon, during which he reportedly quizzed the renowned anti-globalist about topics including economic nationalism and populist movements.

More conventionally, he has stressed steps taken to instill greater discipline among party members and shoring up party authority in meetings with guests as varied as Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Vietnam's Communist Party chief Nguyen Pho Trong and Carlyle Group co-founder David Rubenstein.

"These reforms demonstrated the confidence of society with the (party) Central Committee," Wang told Trong last year.

Despite such anodyne declarations, Wang's intelligence, personality and drive leave a definite impression. One much-circulated photo shows him with former President Barack Obama smiling and holding a basketball as if taking a lesson on how to shoot baskets.

Former U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson pointed to the former academic's knowledge of history and his "decisive and inquisitive nature," along with his boldness in overcoming obstacles.

"He takes on challenges, does things that have never been done before and succeeds," Paulson wrote for Time magazine's Most Influential People of 2009. Wang also exhibits a "wicked sense of humor," Paulson wrote.

In addition to grappling with corruption, Wang is also expected to capitalize on his experience leading regular exchanges with the U.S. to help guide policy with Washington in the uncertain age of Trump. An early test may be his ability to head off a trade war with the U.S., said Beijing commentator Zhang Lifan.

"We know he is good at finance and the economy and regarded as a troubleshooter, but it is questionable," Zhang said.

The removal of term limits that allows Xi to rule as long as he wishes will also allow Wang to be his vice president indefinitely. With no children and no political dynasty of his own to shape, Wang seems fully committed to being in the

thick of Chinese politics.

Tsang, however, questions whether thatâ€™s a gamble worth taking for either Wang or Xi.

Assigning him such a senior portfolio against accepted norms is politically risky and says much about Xiâ€™s willingness to defy his own party, â€œmuch as Wang is genuinely one of the most able among Chinaâ€™s top level leaders,â€• Tsang said.

â€œIf Xi indeed ignores this, it shows how he is already putting himself in a Leninist strongman mode in how he exercises his leadership from this point onward,â€• he said.

- AP