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Is the Chinese Communist Party Ready for the Future?

As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) prepares to commemorate on July 1 the 100th anniversary of its founding in 1921, it continues to confound policymakers and scholars with its expanding illiberalism amid persistent resilience, defying expectations of eventual moderation and inevitable collapse. From the vantage point of 2021, the CCP has demonstrated that it can adapt to both new and legacy challenges or, at a minimum, find creative ways to kick the can down the road. Not only is the Party resilient, it is also successful: today's Communist Party controls more wealth, commands a more powerful military force, and can exert its influence over farther reaches of the globe than at any other point in its history.

The CCP's repeated ability to defy the odds—from war to global recession—has given rise to triumphalist narratives at home that highlight past successes as proof of a political model superior to electoral democracies.¹ A regime that can oversee decades of breakneck economic growth deserves praise, careful study, and perhaps replication, with Xi Jinping highlighting the “the China solution” (中国方案) in a 2016 speech commemorating the CCP's 95th anniversary.² Indeed, events of the past 12 months, due to China's rapid virus control and economic rebound, have supercharged this domestic sense of validation among both the Party and the people.³

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Yet, this backward-looking narrative of resilience fails to grapple with the future of the CCP in light of Xi Jinping's comprehensive remaking of the Party-state system. Since coming to power in late 2012, Xi has pushed through significant reform and restructuring of the Party in an effort to address perceived organizational shortcomings while simultaneously remolding it to ensure his own political power. These actions range from stringent new political purity tests for current and prospective Party members to a dramatic expansion of the CCP's *de facto* and *de jure* authority over government administration and policymaking.

In some areas, Xi may well have strengthened the Party's organizational foundation, and, in the case of his anti-corruption campaign, given the CCP a much-needed boost in popular support.⁴ Yet in other important domains, Xi has undermined the Party's governing capacity by reducing local-level autonomy and

placing ever greater ideological demands on government officials and cadres. The centralization of power around the CCP apparatus, and especially Xi himself, combined with his efforts to elevate his image above his leadership peers, has reduced the responsiveness of the political system. Xi has also developed and institutionalized an expansive vision of national security, a transformation that at its extreme has underlain the draconian surveillance dragnet in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and the dramatic erosion of political and legal freedoms in Hong Kong. Taken together, these actions constitute a paradigm shift in the Party's organization, priorities, and operations that will constrain Beijing's ability to address both near- and long-term challenges.

The centralization of power has reduced the responsiveness of the political system

In this context, it is important to move past viewing the Party's future as a binary outcome of simply survival or collapse and instead appreciate that the CCP's future trajectory will be shaped by its ability to rectify a series of mounting tensions (or not) that are the result of Xi's governing philosophy. These include trade-offs between Xi's demand for compliance with Beijing's dictates and allowing cadres sufficient autonomy to navigate local realities. Xi wants a Party that is responsive to emerging and incipient challenges, yet local-level cadres are increasingly reluctant to take initiative without signals from Beijing about the proper course of action. He similarly wants Party officials who are politically obedient and personally loyal (i.e., "red"), but also worldly, technically capable, and pragmatic (i.e., "expert"). Perhaps most impactfully, Xi's elimination of the few *de jure* rules governing leadership succession in order to secure his own rule threatens to undue decades of progress in assuring peaceful transfers of power, thus placing Xi's political future and that of the Party's increasingly at odds.

To assess the implications of these mounting tensions, this essay proceeds in the following manner: the first section examines the trajectory of CCP reforms beginning in the late 1970s and Deng Xiaoping’s ascension to set the basis for understanding the importance of Xi’s subsequent actions. The second section examines the diverse and consequential moves by Xi to alter the Party-state system. A third section evaluates the impact of the former on governance in China. A final section looks to the future by offering a series of tensions and trade-offs resulting from Xi’s efforts to remake the party, arguing that China’s ability to resolve these tensions will determine the CCP’s future.

Out of the Maoist Bonfire

Analyses of China’s post-Mao rise since 1978 rightfully emphasize Deng Xiaoping’s adoption of economic “reform and opening,” which saw the gradual, fitful dismantling of the Mao-era command-and-control planning system in favor of market institutions and a vibrant private sector. However, Deng’s administrative reforms—and to a limited degree, his political reforms—during this same period remain underappreciated. The former focused on the professionalization of the Party-state bureaucracy and the modernization of China’s political and legal institutions; the latter sought to ensure that a Mao Zedong-like dictator could never again consolidate near-absolute power.

Early reforms to open the domestic economy to foreign investment and imports faced significant push-back from elements of the Party, military, and powerful ministries, who for ideological or material reasons saw the dismantling of the planned economy as a threat to China’s socialist orientation or their own bureaucratic power. Deng understood that shifting the demographic make-up of the CCP leadership away from “aging cadres with rigid ideas” and toward younger, more reform-minded ones would alleviate overt resistance to the reforms and facilitate more competent policy implementation.⁵ Many who had been considered politically suspect just years earlier were now highly valued for their technocratic prowess, and once-purged officials, such as the economic planner Chen Yun, were welcomed back into the fold after years of ostracism. (Notably, Xi’s father, Xi Zhongxun, was one of them.) While these moves angered more orthodox Party members, the success of the economic reforms strengthened the case for technocratic competence over political servility.

Deng also established formal constraints on executive power. Amendments to the 1982 Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (or State Constitution)

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added term limits to the office of the President, helping to institutionalize the abolishment of life-time tenure (终身制). The Constitution's preamble was reworded to de-emphasize class struggle as the CCP's central purpose, while references to the CCP within the main body of the State Constitution were also removed, leaving only language about the "leadership of the CCP" in the preamble.⁶

Another early focus was on limiting the reach and responsibilities of the CCP itself, which by the time of Mao's death had become both unconstrained and disorganized. During a landmark speech to the CCP Central Committee in August 1980, Deng argued, "it is time for us to distinguish between the responsibilities of the Party and those of the government and to stop substituting the former for the latter."⁷ This movement to "separate the Party and the government" (党政分开) reached its highwater mark at the Seventh Plenum of the 12th Party Congress in October 1987, where Premier Zhao Ziyang argued, "The Party is a political leader, and it should do the work of political leadership."⁸

The explicit purpose of modernizing China's economic and administrative system was to protect and perpetuate the leading role of the CCP, not to usher in full-scale political liberalization. Although Deng and his allies called for some limited political reforms throughout the 1980s, most notably the separation of Party and government, they were not calling for the "Westernization" of the political system. As Deng told Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone in 1986, "The first objective [of political reform] is to ensure the continuing vitality of the Party and the state."⁹

The political convulsions in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 shook the Party to its core and provoked a conservative backlash against the reform agenda. Newly installed CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin (1989–2002) told a group of assembled cadres in late 1989, "We must make sure that the leading authority of all party and state organs is in the hands of loyal Marxists."¹⁰ At the same time, a concerted effort was made to increase the Party's penetration into educational intuitions—a logical move given the prominent role students had played in the demonstrations in Beijing and around China. In 1990, there were only 16,000 university student Party members, down from 23,000 in 1982. By 1995, this number had skyrocketed to 70,000.¹¹ A nationwide "patriotic education" campaign targeted educational institutions was launched in 1994 with the explicit aim of increasingly citizen loyalty to the CCP.¹²

Yet at the same time, Deng and his lieutenants believed that without further economic reform, the Party had no long-term future, for political control without the expansion of material wealth would lead to sclerosis and decline. Before the aging Deng faded into the background, he used a 1992 trip to southern China to make a series of speeches extolling the success of China's reforms and declaring

an end to the debate over whether the reforms should continue. “Why was it that our country could remain stable after the June 4th Incident? It was precisely because we had carried out the reform and the open policy, which have promoted economic growth and raised living standards,” he stated while on the trip.¹³ But Deng was also clear that the prerequisite for continued reform was enforcing political order and protecting the CCP’s monopoly on power. As he earlier proclaimed, “Stability is essential to economic development, and only under the leadership of the Communist Party can there be a stable socialist China.”¹⁴

Getting the balance right between protecting the Party’s organizational integrity and opening up the economy was delicate, with countless cadres and government officials either leaving public service to join a burgeoning market economy or leveraging their public position to rent seek. As Party members moved about the country in search of new profit opportunities, the Party’s Organization Department found keeping tabs on these “floating” Party members (流动党员) increasingly difficult.

By the turn of the century, an increasingly wealthy and powerful CCP was nonetheless facing an identity crisis. It was clear that the private sector was driving China’s growth, but the Party remained outwardly and ideologically hostile to these capitalist forces. In response, then-General Secretary of the CCP, Jiang Zemin, adopted in 2002 the “Three Represents,” a new “evolution” in Party theory that permitted capitalists to join the Communist Party. Jiang’s move was, in the words of political scientist Kellee Tsai, “a complete reversal of [the Party’s] founding principles.”¹⁵ The dilemma was succinctly captured in a 2002 *New York Times* headline, “China’s Communists Try to Decide What They Stand For.”¹⁶

During the leadership of General Secretary Hu Jintao (2002–12), the Party—despite Jiang’s efforts at rebranding—became even more rudderless, representing everything and nothing at the same time. As its ranks expanded, the Party struggled to connect its ideological and theoretical underpinnings to the realities of China’s development trajectory. Economic inequality soared, corruption expanded unchecked, and unregulated industries belched pollution into China’s environment and dumped poison into its food supply.

A 2010 survey found that younger Party members “are much more likely to report self-interest (such as helping their careers, advancing politically, and raising social status) as a motive [for joining the Party] and much less likely to report political and ideological motives (such as serving the people, working for communism, and faith in the CCP) than the older cohorts.”¹⁷ One researcher at the Central Party School called this phenomenon “displaying good meat while selling dog meat.”¹⁸ Basic responsibilities, such as remitting Party membership dues, attending activities and meetings at one’s local Party organization, and remaining current on the latest ideological developments, began to fade into the background for an increasingly modernized, globalized, and economically

self-interested membership. Hu Jintao also struggled to push policy through a political system that had developed powerful political fiefdoms, including within the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee, which was dubbed the “nine dragons taming the water.” This made Hu not *primus inter pares*, but simply *inter pares*.

As this increasingly observable decay and ideological aloofness became more evident, external events bolstered the hardliner case that the CCP faced an array of new threats that could not be solved—and indeed, would only be exacerbated by—the continuation of “reform and opening.” The most notable of these was the 2007–08 Global Financial Crisis, which pointed to the bankruptcy of the neoliberal model of economic development. The Color Revolutions of the mid-2000s and the Arab Spring in 2010 were powerful reminders for the CCP that “people power” movements could metastasize into regime threats. As it looked out at a world it perceived as increasingly hostile, its leaders believed that governance solutions would not be found in Washington, London, or Berlin.

By the time of the 18th Party Congress in late 2012, there was a growing consensus within the Party elite that the CCP faced an array of acute ideological, organizational, and structural problems that demanded a vigorous response. While some important steps had been taken to modernize the CCP and China’s political system since Mao Zedong’s death, significant problems remained, not least of which was the seeming irrelevance of the CCP to many Chinese people. Xi Jinping’s mandate to remake the party was built on this shared concern that the CCP’s inability to address legacy challenges (i.e., graft, organizational myopia, and policy paralysis) would imperil its ability to anticipate and respond to emerging technological, financial, and national security threats.

Xi Remakes the Party-State System

Xi’s ascension to power in late 2012 was simultaneously unsurprising and exceptional in the context of political transitions in China. It was unsurprising insofar as the system clearly telegraphed his elevation in advance and the process unfolded in a relatively stable way. Beginning in 2007 at the 17th Party Congress, he emerged as a leading contender for the top job. This was the first example of the system selecting its future leader and then using Party processes to facilitate a predictable succession process. Indeed, after Xi’s final elevation, some observers went so far as to argue that the reforms Deng Xiaoping had pushed three decades earlier to normalize—if not institutionalize—a process of leadership transition had finally come to fruition.¹⁹

The exceptional aspect of Xi’s ascension was not the nominal success of the transition process, as encouraging as it appeared at the time. Rather, it was

how quickly Xi Jinping moved to consolidate power and remake the CCP, a process that continues today. There are at least three dimensions of this remaking: his decision-making, Party membership and operations, and the rise of the national security state.

Xi's Decision-Making

The first dimension relates to how decisions are made within the Party, and by whom. Unlike Hu Jintao, Xi was able to move quickly to consolidate power, centralize decision-making, and remove rivals. Unlike Hu, he did not have to wait several years before being elevated to head the Central Military Commission, which oversees the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Instead, Xi was installed as CCP General Secretary, PRC President, and head of the military all by the spring of 2013. By comparison, Hu Jintao's power was significantly weaker, owing to the behind-the-scenes machinations of his predecessor, Jiang Zemin. This constrained Hu's scope of action for much of his two terms. Xi, on the other hand, had little to fear from Hu Jintao, giving him a much freer hand to shape policy and politics after fully acceding to power.

Xi moved quickly to build out the Party apparatus to increase his influence over both policy formulation and implementation. While all of China's previous leaders relied on Party organs and institutions to assert authority, what made Xi notable was the intensity and creativity he demonstrated in operationalizing the full Leninist toolkit to advance his political and policy agendas.

Xi looked skeptically at an entrenched bureaucracy due to its policy stasis and pervasive corruption, and in response, he created and headed several new Party-led "leading small groups" (LSG) to drive his top priorities, including those focusing on Comprehensively Deepening Reform, National Security, and Cybersecurity and Informatization. These new LSGs allowed Xi to lead policymaking and run the issues from the Central Committee. At the March 2018 National People's Congress meeting, he then elevated many of these LSGs to become full Commissions (委员会), giving them greater political weight in the Chinese system. Xi now leads eight such Commissions; three were founded as such (in 2017 and 2018), and five were upgraded from LSGs.

Whereas Deng sought to remove the Party apparatus from day-to-day policy decision-making, Xi has reversed this course.²⁰ Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao had strong partnerships with their respective Premiers (Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao), thus giving the State Council significant authority over setting economic policy. Xi, on the other hand, has side-lined Premier Li Keqiang and positioned himself at the center of nearly all key policy discussions. Relatedly, he pushed

Xi Jinping moved exceptionally quickly to consolidate power and remake the CCP

through one of the biggest political restructurings in China’s modern history at the 2018 National People’s Congress, with the CCP subsuming many of the governing and administrative functions that had previously been the domain of the State Council.²¹

Xi’s anti-corruption campaign is unprecedented not only in the reform era, but in the history of elite politics in the PRC. Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao prosecuted officials for graft, but Xi took it to an entirely new level with his focus on not only “swatting flies” (investigating lower-ranking officials) but also “hunting tigers” (targeting Party elite). Xi sent his strongest signals to the Party with his willingness to arrest and convict cadres from the highest reaches of the political apparatus, including one former Politburo Standing Committee member, two Politburo members, two uniformed vice-chairman of the CMC, and over ten members of the Central Committee (including provincial Party heads) in his first term alone. Xi then moved to institutionalize the anti-corruption campaign with the creation of the National Supervisory Commission in Spring 2018, which has oversight over government and Party officials. In his second term, which began in October 2017, Xi has shown no signs of backing away from anti-corruption probes, with recent targets including four Central Committee members, six officials with the military rank of at least major general, and two former provincial party chiefs.²²

Xi actively invested in and expanded the full range of internal security capabilities—both public security services at home and the externally oriented Ministry of State Security—to ensure that Chinese nationals based in the United States, Hong Kong, and other foreign countries could not escape the Party’s purview.²³ Moreover, his use of surveillance technology to facilitate internal security goals has reached its apotheosis in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, where public security officials have pioneered the use of various biometric tools to monitor and detain scores of ethnic Uighurs.

This operationalization of Leninist tools to elevate Xi’s power was bolstered by highly visible propaganda campaigns to establish Xi as a singular figure within the

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Party. A far cry from the full-blown personality cult of Mao Zedong, Xi has nonetheless become omnipresent within Chinese state media, likely in an attempt to bolster the CCP’s popular appeal and to ensure Xi’s own political vision is the only one under consideration. In contradistinction with the distant

and masculine persona Russian leader Vladimir Putin projects, the scholar Maria Repnikova notes that in China, “Xi is portrayed as a kind of family member—older, revered, and a bit softer.”²⁴

In tandem with the propaganda campaign, Xi pushed to increase his symbolic political authority. In late 2016, Xi was elevated to become the “core” of the

Party's Central Committee, a designation that had been granted to Jiang Zemin by Deng Xiaoping, but which Hu Jintao never managed to obtain. The following year, the banner term "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era" was formally included into the CCP Constitution, placing Xi alongside Deng and Mao as the only Chinese leaders to have their names affixed to a body of thought. More recently, the CCP has rolled out the "two safeguards" campaign (两个维护), which calls for protecting Xi's leadership status and the leadership authority of the CCP Central Committee (of which Xi is the "core").²⁵

Remaking the Party

The second major component of Xi's efforts was addressing perceived weaknesses in the structure, composition, and political loyalty of the Party membership. From a membership of 50 at the time of the founding of Congress in 1921, the CCP grew to nearly 89 million members by 2012 and was on pace to reach 100 million members by its 100th anniversary this year. While some within the system had seen this growth as an indication of the Party's popularity and argued for inclusiveness as a means of absorbing new elements into its structure, other voices concerned about the decreasing political quality of the membership and difficulty of effectively managing the entire membership had grown louder over the past decade.²⁶ According to Ye Duchen of the Central Party School, "The problem is a large proportion of Party members join in name only, without necessarily embracing the Party ideologically. Instead of strengthening the Party, they have actually weakened it."²⁷

Under a new guideline of "controlling the overall quantity," first outlined at a January 28, 2013 Politburo meeting, Xi drove a swift and significant correction to the membership growth trend, with the goal of holding the rate of growth at 1.5 percent from 2013 to 2023.²⁸ The new paradigm held that quality of membership was more important than quantity. As Liu Jingbei, a professor at the Party's Shanghai cadre training facility, said of the Soviet Union, "With 200,000 party members, they were successful in seizing power. With two million members, they were able to win the Great Patriotic War [WWII], but when they reached 20 million members, the Party was destroyed and its control over the government lost. This is not something the CCP can ignore."²⁹

As he moved to constrain the growth in membership, Xi next turned to the members themselves. In May 2014, the Organization Department released revised membership guidelines that went back to placing greater emphasis on political and ideological obedience. These were the first such changes to the "Guidelines on Party Member Development Work" since they were first promulgated in 1990, less than a year after the Tiananmen Square crackdown. In line with Xi

Jinping's pronouncements that "ideals" are the "calcium" of the Party, the new guidelines required all individuals entering the CCP to "possess a belief in Marxism and in socialism with Chinese characteristics" as a basic criterion. So too must members "place political standards above all else," which entails priority to Party commands and ideology.³⁰ Current Politburo Standing Committee Member Zhao Leji argued in 2016 that if the Party delayed tackling ideological challenges within the membership—including the spread of liberalism, individualism, sectarianism, and decentralism—a fate similar to the Soviet Union's was not far off.³¹

The size and political loyalty of the Party held in check, Xi turned to Party organizations, the basic unit—or "battle fortress" (战斗堡垒)—in the CCP's governance structure. While the CCP Constitution and the 1993 PRC Company Law had long mandated that any commercial entity or organization in China with more than three Party members needed a functioning Party cell, this requirement had been largely ignored for years, if not decades. Nowhere was this more pronounced than in China's vibrant private sector. During the 80s and 90s, the Party's control over the membership diminished, and by 2003, the Party was "virtually absent" from private companies, in the words of Party scholar Bruce Dickson.³² Under the rubric of a "modern enterprise system with Chinese characteristics," Xi has pushed a thorough revitalization of the role of Party organizations in private firms and state-owned enterprises. According to the CCP's Organization department, by 2018, more than 73 percent of private companies had established a Party organization, an increase of 15 percent over a five-year period. A recent Central Committee directive called for these efforts to "accelerate," such that "Party organizations are in place anywhere the work of the Party extends."³³

The Rise of the National Security State

Third and finally, Xi elevated a new and expansive definition of "national security" to become a key objective of the Party-state. Driving this shift to prioritize national security is Xi's darkening view of China's external environment and a growing frustration with the Party-state's ability to head-off internal challenges. As Xi outlined in a 2014 speech, "At present, the national security issues facing China encompass far more subjects, extend over a greater range and cover a longer time scale than at any time in the country's history."³⁴

First outlined in 2013–14, what became known as the *Overall National Security Outlook* (总体国家安全观) has expanded to become an all-encompassing, broad, and somewhat *sui-generis* view of national security that now permeates all levels of national strategy and policymaking. It has also been institutionalized through new governing bodies and legislation, including the creation of a National

Security Council in 2014.³⁵ Whereas traditional definitions of national security are often externally focused and specific in their concerns in order to aid prioritization, Xi's approach to national security sees no distinction between internal and external security; in addition, it lacks conceptual boundaries, encompassing everything from culture to economics to ideology. As political scientist Sheena Greitens observes, "This breadth [of Xi's view of national security] means that almost anything can be considered a security threat, and/or addressed via the national security tools that China is developing."³⁶

As a result, cadres up and down the Leninist hierarchy must signal their vigilance in stamping out actual or imagined threats, sometimes to degrees bordering on paranoia.³⁷ Other policy domains, such as economic and social policy, increasingly reference national security as a core goal, a development that impacts how problems are diagnosed, what solutions conceived, and how resources are channeled. The recently released 14th Five Year Plan was notable for its focus on various aspects of national security, including with a separate section for the first time on integrating development and security. Xi's desire to use this economic plan to reduce China's exposure to external economies and rely more on domestic demand is driven by a desire to minimize China's vulnerability to foreign coercion. Given the CCP's long-standing and well-established tendencies toward secrecy, paranoia, and threat inflation, Xi's *Overall National Security Outlook* threatens to crowd out voices advocating openness and integration.

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Effects on the CCP's Governing Capacity and Resiliency

These reforms to the Party's structure, organization, composition, and decision-making process raise a critical question: what effect have they had on the CCP's governance capacity and regime resiliency? Two recent case studies—the COVID-19 response and poverty alleviation—offer glimpses into the shortcomings and advantages of China's evolving governance model.

The COVID-19 Test Case

The first is the bureaucratic and political response to COVID-19. In theory, China should have been well prepared for such an outbreak, having spent years building the country's public health system in the wake of the 2003 SARS epidemic, but also owing to Xi's efforts to more closely align local-level

cadres with Beijing. Indeed, just months before the first case of COVID-19 emerged in Wuhan, the head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention asserted, “I can very confidently say there won’t be another ‘SARS incident’ … Because our country’s infectious-disease surveillance network is very well-established, when a virus comes, we can stop it.”³⁸

Yet for weeks after a cluster of cases was first reported near the Huanan Seafood Market, local health and political authorities both hesitated to inform national-level public health organs and discouraged information about the virus to be shared within the broader public health community. A leaked emergency notice dated December 30th from the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission warned that unauthorized information about the virus should not be disclosed, and private labs were instructed to cease any further testing of virus samples. Equally problematic, Wuhan municipal officials and Hubei provincial authorities allowed mass gatherings related to the Lunar New Year, despite knowledge circulating among local public health officials that a virus was spreading throughout the city.³⁹

It was not until Xi Jinping made public comments about the virus on January 20, 2020 that the system finally kicked into gear. In the days that followed Xi’s remarks, carefully choreographed discussion of COVID-19 appeared in state media, and Beijing began to regularly communicate to the public the steps it was taking to address the growing pandemic.

Xi’s direct and public involvement in managing COVID-19 marked a second distinct phase in the Party’s response to the crisis. If the first month and a half were typified by local-level secrecy, foot-dragging, and fear of Beijing’s rebuke, by late January, the mobilizational capabilities inherent in the CCP’s top-down Leninist structure displayed the speed and scale Chinese leaders can bring to bear when sufficiently motivated. State-owned enterprises shifted to producing PPE and building public health-related infrastructure. Beijing created a new “Coronavirus Leading Small Group,” headed by Premier Li Keqiang, to coordinate national and local-level activities. Similarly, a new “Central Guidance Group” (中央指导组) led by Vice Premier Sun Chunlan set up shop in Wuhan to run the local-level response.

Beijing also put its considerable technological surveillance and “grid management” capabilities to work controlling the spread of the virus. Here, Xi’s efforts to build, strengthen, and expand the country’s domestic security apparatus were quickly put to work tracking individual movements and enforcing draconian travel restrictions. Mandatory installation of health applications on smart phones provided public health and government authorities with vast troves of personal information and data.⁴⁰

To be sure, the Party’s ultimate response to COVID-19 highlights the continuing mobilizational power of CCP’s campaign style of governance.⁴¹ When

top-level attention and urgency is focused on a specific problem, China can move quickly and at scale. After Xi declared a “people’s war” on the coronavirus in February 2020, the political system focused its efforts and resources on fulfilling Beijing’s commands from the production of PPE to the construction of new medical facilities in a matter of days. This pace of system-wide, mobilized action continued throughout 2020, helping to stamp out the virus’ spread and facilitate a rapid economic recovery.

Yet at the same time, the delayed recognition of the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates the perils of top-down control, which frequently exacerbates emergent problems by disincentivizing negative information from traveling up the chain of command. Central-level leaders, who nominally possess significant power over sub-national cadres, often find themselves in the dark. The tendency of local-level officials to shield higher-level authorities from negative information, as well as to proactively stifle open discussion of “sensitive” news, not only persist under Xi, but it is arguable that the more “accountability” he demands from government and Party officials, the greater lengths they will go to obfuscate inconvenient truths.⁴²

Similarly, the failure of the system to respond fully and effectively until Xi personally weighed in on the growing pandemic highlights the perils of highly personalist authoritarian systems. With Xi occupying an increasingly central role in almost all policy and political domains (in contradistinction to more distributed policy portfolios under the Hu and Jiang administrations), he has become both a powerful catalyst for action and a significant bottleneck on it. Where Xi is engaged and focused, the system can move quickly. When distracted or ignorant, problems fester or otherwise remain ignored.

**The Party’s
COVID-19
response demon-
strates top-down
control’s mobiliza-
tional power and
perils**

Xi’s Poverty Alleviation Initiative

If the CCP’s response to COVID-19 provides a lens through which to analyze its capability to respond to negative shocks, Xi’s “poverty alleviation” campaign highlights the pitfalls of top-down mandates and artificial deadlines in proactive government initiatives. In 2014, Xi unveiled the goal of “eliminating” poverty in China by the time the Party commemorated its 100th anniversary. The following year, mandatory poverty alleviation targets were included in the 13th Five-Year Plan, including a requirement that nearly 56 million rural residents “lift themselves” out of poverty by 2020. Yet, as economist Terry Sicular points out, these targets excluded the urban poor and set the income threshold for rural

poverty at approximately US\$2.30 per person per day, a number that is roughly equal to the World Bank's definition of "extreme poverty."⁴³

The relatively narrow definition of poverty, combined with Xi's close identification with the campaign and its ultimate outcome, all but assured its final "success." Experts who study poverty, however, doubt the final effectiveness of the effort. As one World Bank official told the *New York Times*, "We're pretty sure China's eradication of absolute poverty in rural areas has been successful —given the resources mobilized, we are less sure it is sustainable or cost effective."⁴⁴ In short, Xi's campaign to reduce poverty appears to have been more performative to meet immediate political goals than one that produced lasting gains in which people don't slide back into dire economic circumstances.

Indeed, as the December 2020 deadline for the campaign approached, local officials became increasingly aggressive and creative in their efforts to meet their targets, including coercively resettling citizens into newer housing units as well as offering cheap loans and grants (totaling nearly US\$700 million) and direct cash payments. Similarly, central authorities were consistently frustrated by the quality of data and statistics coming from sub-national cadres, leading Xi Jinping himself to decry "fake" or "statistical" poverty alleviation.⁴⁵ The sums of money moving about the country to satisfy poverty alleviation targets also opened up space for corruption, with nearly 100,000 individuals investigated and ultimately punished.⁴⁶

Beijing continues to tout the success of the campaign as a signature Xi policy initiative. Thus, within China, there is little political space for questioning its shortcomings or how far it went to address the underlying causes of poverty. It is notable that cadres and policymakers were exclusively focused on moving rural residents over the official poverty line by the end of 2020 rather than taking the structural reforms needed to ensure long-term and enduring gains in poverty alleviation such as strengthening and expanding the country's social safety net, access to health care, and pension system. These would all help to prevent China's poor from falling backward into low-income status in the future.

Taken together, these two case studies point to some of the key characteristics of Xi's actual, existing governance system. First, increasing oversight from Beijing to ensure "accountability" and political discipline has resulted in a system that can be slower to respond initially, as sub-national officials obfuscate or delay conveying negative information. On the other hand, once the system fully kicks into gear at Xi's prompting, it can move swiftly and significantly mobilize resources.

Xi may have molded the CCP into a more outwardly disciplined political and policy apparatus, but the desire (and career necessity) to satisfy Beijing's demands means that style will increasingly triumph over substance at all levels of Chinese governance. As evident in the race to "alleviate" poverty, lower-level officials will develop creative methods to signal surface-level compliance with central

dictates. As Xi continues to propose bold new initiatives, almost all of them will “succeed” in the pages of the *People’s Daily*. But this will come at a cost of fundamentally addressing China’s manifest challenges.

Where Is the CCP Headed?

Based on the preceding analysis, it seems imperative that policymakers and scholars should move beyond the overly narrow “collapse or dominate” forecast that has typified much of the debate on the CCP’s future.

The Party’s consistent (and seldomly predicted) ability to adapt in the face of social, political, technological, and economic challenges points to critical gaps in how outside observers measure and judge regime resilience.⁴⁷ Recent examples, including Beijing’s response to COVID-19, highlight both strengths and weaknesses of the system.

The degree to which Xi has bolstered the CCP’s governing capacity or is gradually degrading it is therefore unclear, but recent trends are not encouraging. Policymakers, scholars, and analysts should be focused on that very question, as it relates to the CCP’s resilience and, by extension, China’s overall stability. The coming decade will present new and more complicated challenges, some of which will undoubtedly stress the CCP’s unity and organizational integrity in novel ways. The answers to these questions are likely to emerge as the byproduct of a series of critical tensions—either newly emerging or newly exacerbated—due to Xi’s exertions. We believe there are three critical tensions to watch.

Policymakers and scholars should move beyond overly narrow “collapse or dominate” forecasts

Centralization vs Adaptability

Despite its Leninist roots, in the four decades following Mao’s death, the CCP has displayed a high degree of flexibility, adaptability, and pragmatism. Even as Beijing remained resistant to liberalizing political reforms, successive leaders since the mid-1970s embraced (or at least tolerated) a large degree of political decentralization, muted ideological demands, comfort with greater market-determined resource allocation, and law- or process-based policymaking. While this approach to governance created sub-optimal outcomes from Beijing’s perspective—notably rampant corruption and uneven policy implementation—it nonetheless allowed for near-constant adjustment as the country navigated the challenges and uncertainty attendant with rebuilding an economy and re-entering the global order.

While China's rulers—dating back hundreds of years—have faced persistent limitations in their ability to control local actors, Xi has nonetheless dramatically reduced the level of practical flexibility that cadres possess. As the University of Virginia's Brantly Womack observes, Xi's leadership style "precludes the autonomy of other officials and lower levels of governance. He is the core; they are the periphery."⁴⁸ Rather than welcoming—indeed, even allowing—innovation and experimentation in solving local challenges, Xi has pushed a conceptual framework he calls "top-level design," which stresses "overall planning/design" (统筹设计) over the economic, political, social, and environmental domains. Of course, while Xi argues this is necessary for better policy coordination and implementation, it nonetheless redistributes authority away from on-the-ground political actors and back to Party officials in Beijing.

Without policy experiments and adjustments occurring *en masse* on the local level, as was the case for much of the Reform and Opening period, innovations must come from Beijing. Yet under Xi, new and heterodox ideas about governance face significant bureaucratic inertia. Furthermore, by demanding political fidelity to the dictates of the CCP and "absolute loyalty" to Xi, cadres up and down the Party hierarchy will increasingly have a difficult, if not impossible, time finding flexibility and space for innovation and initiative. By unleashing a campaign to eradicate corruption without institutional or legal constraints and with no end in sight, Xi has instilled fear and loathing within vast pockets of the Party membership. By enforcing one of the most restrictive ideological environments for cadres since the Mao era, Xi

risks cutting off channels of information that are vital for effective decision-making.⁴⁹

For all of Xi's lambasting of "formalism" and "bureaucratism" within China's political system, he appears aloof or indifferent to his own direct contribution to these governance pathologies. The key tension to watch, then, is how China's sub-national party and state actors will respond to new and emerging economic and social challenges when Xi demands that all eyes look to Beijing for commands and clarity.

A sort of anti-intellectualism, in deference to Party loyalty and ideological correctness, is emerging

Red vs Expert

Xi Jinping's doctrinaire approach to party-state relations—both the ideas and the organizational changes—is creating an environment in which ideological correctness, Party loyalty, and political rectitude are undermining the value of expertise and professionalism in government affairs and policymaking. Unlike during the Cultural Revolution, this is a more subtle, incipient, and evolving

phenomenon. Xi clearly values the expertise of his top aides, especially on economic affairs. Yet, the farther one moves out of Zhongnanhai, the more one finds a political environment in which the need to demonstrate fealty to Xi and defend the CCP (or be seen as doing so) is eroding the opportunities for expertise to prevail in decision-making. We are not predicting a return to the 1960s and 1970s when scientists and research institutes were rusticated. Rather, we are concerned about an emerging sort of anti-intellectualism in which even appeals to national interest based on experience and expertise can be subject to intensive criticism, if not outright rejection.

In foreign policy, this trend can be seen in the rise and persistence of caustic Chinese public diplomacy. Chinese diplomats now publicly seek to denigrate and coerce foreigners that criticize the Party. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, China's foreign relations were replete with examples of diplomats offering medical supplies in exchange for a foreign government's public affirmation of Xi's handling of the crisis. China's aggressive public diplomacy and economic coercion against Australia after it called for an international investigation into the origins of COVID offers a high profile and broad ranging example of China's politically correct diplomacy. Beijing's campaign against Australia, which persists today, is producing the strategic recalibration of a country that heretofore sought to find a balance between Washington and Beijing.

Beyond these specific examples, Xi's emphasis on loyalty, top-down management, and his *Overall National Security Outlook*—at home and abroad—is manifesting in an even more nationalist foreign policy. Chinese analysts and policymakers are fixated even more on their grievance with the West and their desire to surpass the United States. As Politburo member Yang Jiechi publicly stated during his meeting with senior US officials in Alaska in March, “So we believe that it is important for the United States to change its own image and to stop advancing its own democracy in the rest of the world ... The United States itself does not represent international public opinion, and neither does the Western world. Whether judged by population scale or the trend of the world, the Western world does not represent the global public opinion.”⁵⁰

Ultimately, these Chinese sentiments and the resulting policies will pose a challenge for Xi as he seeks to position China as a leader in setting global rules and norms on questions of technology, emerging security issues, and even institutional architecture. Chinese nationalism and its desire for global influence appear to be increasingly in tension. The very actions China may take in the future to defend and promote the CCP and Chinese interest abroad are already creating frictions internationally and generating a growing set of concerns about China's current and future strategic intentions. An expanding group of countries, such as in Europe, are more anxious about how China will use its growing power, especially economic power, to advance its political goals.

The PLA may also suffer a related illness, exacerbating its existing problems. Xi's centralization of power and rectification of the Party will do little to bring about joint-ness in the PLA and will exacerbate the tendencies for top-down management, for stove-piped decision-making, and for putting control over commanding when it comes to the conduct of military operations. Perhaps CCP dictates can help to break down entrenched services cultures, but replacing them with a generic loyalty to the Party will do little to strengthen the PLA's lethality. As political scientist Andrew Scobell writes, if Xi has succeeded in achieving one thing, it is the creation of a "chairman responsibility system" with Xi at the center of most major military decision due to the PLA's organizational overhaul. Scobell concludes, "these changes are also a recipe for greater top-down micromanagement and considerable command paralysis, without solving stove-piping at lower echelons."⁵¹

Xi's Future versus Future of the CCP

The most fundamental tension building in the system is between Xi's personal ambitions and the long-term health of the Party. While Xi has undoubtedly conflated the two, it is becoming increasingly apparent that what is politically good for Xi threatens the resiliency of the CCP.

The most fundamental tension is between Xi's personal ambitions and long-term health of the Party

Consider the issue of leadership succession, arguably the most important component of political stability. As it stands in 2021, few have any credible insight into how long Xi intends to remain in power. Having abolished the only *de jure* term limits on power in March 2018 and eradicated any competing power centers that might constrain his leadership

tenure, China yet again confronts a future in which politics will be dominated by one individual for indeterminate lengths of time.

This domination presents two significant challenges for the CCP. First, since he has failed to identify and groom successors, Xi leaves China exposed to a potential leadership vacuum should he die in office or otherwise become incapacitated.⁵² As in the wake of Stalin's death in 1953, when confusion and conflict emerged as soon as he was found incapacitated from stroke, the absence of a widely accepted successor opens the door for an elite-level scramble for power. Even if Xi were to nominally select an heir, if this individual has not been steadily groomed for power by building trust across the entire political-military apparatus (and, to date, no one has such a distinction), they might well end up as did Hua Guofeng, Mao's chosen successor who was marginalized in a matter of years.

Second, even assuming Xi remains in good health for the next decade plus, by remaining in power and the dominant political figure, the CCP will inevitably calcify around Xi's personalistic dictatorship, further accentuating all of the political and policy-making distortions mentioned above. The Party will become his Party, with an undoubted degrading effect on its governing capacity. What's good for Xi, unfortunately, will increasingly come at the expense of the Party's organizational resilience and professionalism.

Conclusion

Xi is changing the CCP and China in fundamental ways, and not necessarily for the better. His effort to make the Party stronger and more resilient—to avoid the fate of the Soviet Union—is sowing the seeds of future governance challenges. Xi's hyper-centralized decision-making, his rectification of the Party and ideology, his elevation of his own personage as the “core” of the political system, and his unlimited and unconstrained view of national security are the root causes of current and future governance dysfunction. Instead of making the Party-state more adaptive and resilient, he is making policymaking more rigid, doctrinaire, opaque, misguided, and ultimately ineffective. The Party-state system is becoming less nimble and responsive; it is identifying the wrong priorities and/or generating ineffective solutions. To be sure, we are not predicting imminent or eventual collapse. The system's ability to mobilize resources and apply them, campaign style, to problem solving remains impressive. And China certainly has substantial momentum aiding its ability to tackle its problems at home.

Instead, we see a gathering storm: a series of accumulating tensions and contradictions in how Xi is running the country. These are creating dilemmas for Chinese cadres and policymakers in their efforts to solve China's substantial remaining development challenges—economic, social, and political. Notably, China's decarbonization agenda is incredibly ambitious and will require a fundamental rewiring of the economy and society to be achieved. More immediately, China will face political succession questions sooner rather than later; this is a biological reality.

Perhaps the Party will do what it has done so many times before in its 100-year history: adapt in the face of new challenges. Yet this adaptation cannot be taken for granted. Political systems and empires that appear implacable from the outside often self-destruct from within. The more powerful Xi becomes and the more certain he is of his mission, the greater the threat he becomes to himself, his country, and possibly to the world.

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