

The Weakness of Xi Jinping

How Hubris and Paranoia Threaten China's Future

By Cai Xia

Not long ago, Chinese President Xi Jinping was riding high. He had consolidated power within the Chinese Communist Party. He had elevated himself to the same official status as the CCP's iconic leader, Mao Zedong, and done away with presidential term limits, freeing him to lead China for the rest of his life. At home, he boasted of having made huge strides in reducing poverty; abroad, he claimed to be raising his country's international prestige to new heights. For many Chinese, Xi's strongman tactics were the acceptable price of national revival.

Outwardly, [Xi](#) still projects confidence. In a speech in January 2021, he declared China "invincible." But behind the scenes, his power is being questioned as never before. By discarding China's long tradition of collective rule and creating a cult of personality reminiscent of the one that surrounded Mao, Xi has rankled party insiders. A series of policy missteps, meanwhile, have disappointed even supporters. Xi's reversal of economic reforms and his inept response to the COVID-19 pandemic have shattered his image as a hero of everyday people. In the shadows, resentment among CCP elites is rising.

I have long had a front-row seat to the CCP's court intrigue. For 15 years, I was a professor in the Central Party School, where I helped train thousands of high-ranking CCP cadres who staff China's bureaucracy. During my tenure at the school, I advised the CCP's top leadership on building the party, and I continued to do so after retiring in 2012. In 2020, after I criticized Xi, I was expelled from the party, stripped of my retirement benefits, and warned that my safety was in danger. I now live in exile in the United States, but I stay in touch with many of my contacts in China.

At the CCP's 20th National Party Congress this fall, Xi expects that he will be given a third five-year term. And even if the growing irritation among some party elites means that his bid will not go entirely uncontested, he will probably succeed. But that success will bring more turbulence down the road. Emboldened by the unprecedented additional term, Xi will likely tighten his grip even further domestically and raise his ambitions internationally. As Xi's rule becomes more extreme, the infighting and resentment he has already triggered will only grow stronger. The competition between various factions within the party will get more intense, complicated, and brutal than ever before.

At that point, China may experience a vicious cycle in which Xi reacts to the perceived sense of threat by taking ever bolder actions that generate even more pushback. Trapped in an echo chamber and desperately seeking redemption, he may even do something catastrophically ill advised, such as attack Taiwan. Xi may well ruin something China has earned over the course of four decades: a reputation for steady, competent leadership. In fact, he already has.

THE CHINESE MAFIA

In many respects, the CCP has changed little since the party took power in 1949. Now, as then, the party exercises absolute control over China, ruling over its military, its administration, and its rubber-stamp legislature. The party hierarchy, in turn, answers to the Politburo Standing Committee, the top decision-making body in China. Composed of anywhere from five to nine members of the broader Politburo, the Standing Committee is headed by the party's general secretary, China's paramount leader. Since 2012, that has been Xi.

The details of how the Standing Committee operates are a closely guarded secret, but it is widely known that many decisions are made through the circulation of documents dealing with major policy questions, in the margins of which the committee's members add comments. The papers are written by top leaders in ministries and other party organs, as well as experts from the best universities and think tanks, and to have one's memo circulated among the Standing Committee members is considered a credit to the writer's home institution. When I was a professor, the Central Party School set a quota for the production of such memos of about one a month. Authors whose memos were read by the Standing Committee were rewarded with the equivalent of roughly \$1,500—more than a professor's monthly salary.

Another feature of the party system has remained constant: the importance of personal connections. When it comes to one's rise within the party hierarchy, individual relationships, including one's family reputation and Communist pedigree, matter as much as competence and ideology.

That was certainly the case with Xi's career. Contrary to Chinese propaganda and the assessment of many Western analysts that he rose through his talent, the opposite is true. Xi benefited immensely from the connections of his father, Xi Zhongxun, a CCP leader with impeccable revolutionary credentials who served briefly as propaganda minister under Mao. When Xi Jinping was a county party chief in the northern province of Hebei in the early 1980s, his mother wrote a note to the province's party chief asking him to take an interest in Xi's advancement. But that official, Gao Yang, ended up disclosing the note's content at a meeting of the province's Politburo Standing Committee. The revelation was a great embarrassment to the family since it violated the CCP's new campaign against seeking favors. (Xi would never forget the incident: in 2009, when Gao died, he pointedly declined to attend his funeral, a breach of custom given that both had served as president of the Central Party School.) Such a scandal would have ruined the average rising cadre's career, but Xi's connections came to the rescue: the father of Fujian's party chief had been a close confidant of Xi's father, and the families arranged a rare reassignment to that province.

Xi would continue to fail upward. In 1988, after losing his bid for deputy mayor in a local election, he was promoted to district party chief. Once there, however, Xi languished on account of his middling performance. In the CCP, moving from the district level to the provincial level is a major hurdle, and for years, he could not overcome it. But once again, family connections intervened. In 1992, after Xi's mother wrote a plea to the new party leader in Fujian, Jia Qinglin, Xi was transferred to the provincial capital. At that point, his career took off.

As all lower-level cadres know, to climb the CCP ladder, one must find a higher-level boss. In Xi's case, this proved easy enough, since many party leaders held his father in high esteem. His first and most important mentor was Geng Biao, a top diplomatic and military official who had once worked for Xi's father. In 1979, he took on the younger Xi as a secretary. The need for such patrons early on has knock-on effects decades down the line. High-level officials each have

their own “lineages,” as insiders call these groups of protégés, which amount to de facto factions within the CCP. Indeed, disputes that are framed as ideological and policy debates within the CCP are often something much less sophisticated: power struggles among various lineages. Such a system can also lead to tangled webs of personal loyalty. If one’s mentor falls out of favor, the effect is the professional equivalent of being orphaned.

Outsiders may find it helpful to think of the CCP as more of a mafia organization than a political party. The head of the party is the don, and below him sit the underbosses, or the Standing Committee. These men traditionally parcel out power, with each responsible for certain areas—foreign policy, the economy, personnel, anticorruption, and so on. They are also supposed to serve as the big boss’s consiglieres, advising him on their areas of responsibility. Outside the Standing Committee are the other 18 members of the Politburo, who are next in the line of succession for the Standing Committee. They can be thought of as the mafia’s capos, carrying out Xi’s orders to eliminate perceived threats in the hope of staying in the good graces of the don. As a perk of their position, they are allowed to enrich themselves as they see fit, seizing property and businesses without penalty. And like the mafia, the party uses blunt tools to get what it wants: bribery, extortion, even violence.

SHARING IS CARING

Although the power of personal connections and the flexibility of formal rules have remained constant since Communist China’s founding, one thing has shifted over time: the degree to which power is concentrated in a single man. From the mid-1960s onward, Mao had absolute control and the final say on all matters, even if he exercised his power episodically and was officially merely first among equals. But when Deng Xiaoping became China’s de facto leader in 1978, he chipped away at Mao’s one-man, lifelong dictatorship.

Deng restricted China’s presidency to two five-year terms and established a form of collective leadership, allowing other officials—first Hu Yaobang and then Zhao Ziyang—to serve as head of the party, even if he remained the power behind the throne. In 1987, the CCP decided to reform the process for selecting members of the Central Committee, the party’s nominal overseer and the body from which Politburo members are chosen. For the first time, the party proposed more candidates than there were seats—hardly a democratic election, but a step in the right direction. Even the endorsement of Deng could not guarantee success: for example, Deng Liqun, a Maoist ideologue whom Deng Xiaoping had promised to promote to the Politburo, failed to earn enough votes and was forced to retire from political life. (It is worth noting that when the Central Committee held an election in 1997, Xi barely squeaked by. He had the fewest votes of all those selected to join, reflecting a general distaste within the party for “princelings,” descendants of top CCP leaders who rose thanks to nepotism rather than merit.)

Seeking to avoid a repeat of the disastrous Cultural Revolution, when Maoist propaganda reached its apogee, Deng also sought to prevent any leader from forming a cult of personality. As early as 1978, a student from the Central Party School who was a close family friend noticed on a school trip to a pig farm in the Beijing suburbs that items that Hua Guofeng had used on an inspection visit—a hot water bottle, a teacup—were displayed in a glass cabinet, as if it were a religious shrine. My friend wrote to Hua criticizing the personal worship, and Hua had the display removed. In 1982, China’s leaders went so far as to write into the party constitution a ban on cults of personality, which they viewed as uniquely dangerous.

Deng was willing to go only so far in sharing power, and he forced out Hu and Zhao successively when each proved too politically liberal. But Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, deepened the political reforms. Jiang institutionalized his group of advisers to operate more as an executive office. He sought advice from all members of the Standing Committee, which now made decisions by majority vote, and he circulated draft speeches widely. Jiang also made the elections to the Central Committee slightly more competitive by increasing the ratio of candidates to seats. Even princelings, including one of Deng's sons, lost their elections.

When Hu Jintao took over from Jiang in 2002, China moved even further toward collective leadership. Hu ruled with the consent of the nine members of the Standing Committee, a clique known as the "nine dragons controlling the water." There were downsides to this egalitarian approach. A single member of the Standing Committee could veto any decision, driving the perception of Hu as a weak leader unable to overcome gridlock. For nearly a decade, the economic reforms that began under Deng stalled. But there were upsides, too, since the need for consensus prevented careless decisions. When SARS broke out in China during his first year in office, for instance, Hu acted prudently, firing China's health minister for covering up the extent of the outbreak, and encouraging cadres to report infections truthfully.

Hu also sought to expand the use of term limits. Although he ran into resistance when he tried to institute term limits for members of the Politburo and its Standing Committee, he did manage to introduce them at the level of provincial ministers and below. More successfully, Hu established an unprecedented process by which the composition of the Politburo was first selected by a vote of senior party members.

Ironically, it was through this quasi-democratic system that Xi rose to the heights of power. In 2007, at an expanded meeting of the Central Committee, the CCP's top 400 or so leaders gathered in Beijing to cast votes recommending which ministerial-level officials from a list of 200 should join the 25-member Politburo. Xi received the most. The deciding factor, I suspect, was not his record as party chief of Zhejiang or Shanghai but the respect voters held for his father, along with the endorsement of (and pressure from) some key party elders. In a similar advisory election five years later, Xi got the most votes and, by the consensus of the outgoing leaders, ascended to the top of the pyramid. He swiftly got to work undoing decades of progress on collective leadership.

PARTY OF ONE?

When Xi took the reins, many in the West hailed him as a Chinese Mikhail Gorbachev. Some imagined that, like the Soviet Union's final leader, Xi would embrace radical reforms, releasing the state's grip on the economy and democratizing the political system. That, of course, turned out to be a fantasy. Instead, Xi, a devoted student of Mao and just as eager to leave his mark on history, has worked to establish his absolute power. And because previous reforms failed to place real checks and balances on the party leader, he has succeeded. Now, as under Mao, China is a one-man show.

One part of Xi's plot to consolidate power was to solve what he characterized as an ideological crisis. The Internet, he said, was an existential threat to the CCP, having caused the party to lose control of people's minds. So Xi cracked down on bloggers and online activists, censored dissent, and strengthened China's "great firewall" to restrict access to foreign websites. The effect was to strangle a nascent civil society and eliminate public opinion as a check on Xi.

Another step he took was to launch an anticorruption campaign, framing it as a mission to save the party from self-destruction. Since corruption was endemic in China, with nearly every official a potential target, Xi was able to use the campaign as a political purge. Official data show that from December 2012 to June 2021, the CCP investigated 393 leading cadres above the provincial ministerial level, officials who are often being groomed for top positions, as well as 631,000 section-level cadres, foot soldiers who implement the CCP's policies at the grassroots level. The purge has ensnared some of the most powerful officials whom Xi deemed threatening, including Zhou Yongkang, a former Standing Committee member and the head of China's security apparatus, and Sun Zhengcai, a Politburo member whom many saw as a rival and potential successor to Xi.

Tellingly, those who helped Xi rise have been left untouched. Jia Qinglin, Fujian's party chief in the 1990s and eventually a member of the Standing Committee, was instrumental in helping Xi climb the ranks of power. Although there is reason to believe that he and his family are exceedingly corrupt—the Panama Papers, the trove of leaked documents from a law firm, revealed that his granddaughter and son-in-law own several secret offshore companies—they have not been caught up in Xi's anticorruption campaign.

Xi's tactics are not subtle. As I learned from one party insider whom I cannot name for fear of getting him in trouble, around 2014, Xi's men went to a high-ranking official who had openly criticized Xi and threatened him with a corruption investigation if he didn't stop. (He shut up.) In pursuing their targets, Xi's subordinates often pressure officials' family members and assistants. Wang Min, the party chief of Liaoning Province, whom I knew well from our days as students at the Central Party School, was arrested in 2016 on the basis of statements from his chauffeur, who said that while in the car, Wang had complained to a fellow passenger about being passed over for promotion. Wang was sentenced to life in prison, with one of the charges being resistance to Xi's leadership.

After ejecting his rivals from key positions, Xi installed his own people. Xi's lineage within the party is known as the "New Zhijiang Army." The group consists of his former subordinates during his time as governor of Fujian and Zhejiang Provinces and even university classmates and old friends going back to middle school. Since assuming power, Xi has quickly promoted his acolytes, often beyond their level of competence. His roommate from his days at Tsinghua University, Chen Xi, was named head of the CCP's Organization Department, a position that comes with a seat on the Politburo and the power to decide who can move up the hierarchy. Yet Chen has no relevant qualifications: his five immediate predecessors had experience with local party affairs, whereas he spent nearly all his career at Tsinghua University.

Xi undid another major reform: "the separation of party and state," an effort to reduce the degree to which ideologically driven party cadres interfered with technical and managerial decisions in government agencies. In an attempt to professionalize the bureaucracy, Deng and his successors tried, with varying degrees of success, to insulate the administration from CCP interference. Xi has backtracked, introducing some 40 ad hoc party commissions that end up directing governmental agencies. Unlike his predecessors, for example, he has his own team to handle issues regarding the South China Sea, bypassing the Foreign Ministry and the State Oceanic Administration.

The effect of these commissions has been to take significant power away from the head of China's government, Premier Li Keqiang, and turn what was once a position of co-captain into a

sidekick. The change can be seen in the way Li comports himself in public appearances. Whereas Li's two immediate predecessors, Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao, stood side by side with Jiang and Hu, respectively, Li knows to keep his distance from Xi, as if to emphasize the power differential. Moreover, in the past, official communications and state media referred to the "Jiang-Zhu system" and the "Hu-Wen system," but almost no one today speaks of a "Xi-Li system." There has long been a push and pull between the party and the government in China—what insiders call the struggle between the "South Courtyard" and the "North Courtyard" of Zhongnanhai, the imperial compound that hosts the headquarters of both institutions. But by insisting that everyone look up to him as the highest authority, Xi has exacerbated tensions.

Xi has also changed the dynamic within the Standing Committee. For the first time in CCP history, all Politburo members, even those on the Standing Committee, must report directly to the head of the party by submitting periodic reports to Xi, who personally reviews their performance. Gone is the camaraderie and near equality among Standing Committee members that once prevailed. As one former official in Beijing told me, one of the committee's seven members—Wang Qishan, China's vice president and a longtime ally of Xi—has grumbled to friends that the dynamic between Xi and the lesser members is that of an emperor and his ministers.

The most brazen change Xi has ushered in is to remove China's presidential term limit. Like every paramount leader from Jiang onward, Xi holds three positions concurrently: president of China, leader of the party, and head of the military. Although the limit of two five-year terms applied only to the first of those three positions, beginning with Hu, there was an understanding that it must also apply to the other two to make it possible for the same person to hold all three posts.

But in 2018, at Xi's behest, China's legislature amended the constitution to do away with the presidential term limit. The justification was laughable. The professed goal was to make the presidency consistent with the party and military positions, even though the obvious reform would have been the reverse: to add term limits to those positions.

Then there is the cult of personality. Even though the ban on such cults remains in the party constitution, Xi and his deputies have demanded a degree of loyalty and admiration for the leader not seen since Mao. Ever since 2016, when Xi was declared the party's "core leader" (a term never given to his predecessor, Hu), Xi has positioned himself in front of members of the Standing Committee in official portraits. His own portraits are hung everywhere, Mao style, in government offices, schools, religious sites, and homes. According to Radio France Internationale, Xi's subordinates have proposed renaming Tsinghua University, his alma mater and China's top school, Xi Jinping University. They have even argued for hanging his picture alongside Mao's in Tiananmen Square. Although neither idea went anywhere, Xi did manage to get Xi Jinping Thought enshrined in the party's constitution in 2017—joining Mao as the only other leader whose own ideology was added to the document while in office—and in the state constitution the next year. In one lengthy article published in Xinhua, the state media organ, in 2017, a propagandist crowned Xi with seven new North Korean-style titles that would have made his post-Mao predecessors blush: "groundbreaking leader," "diligent worker for the people's happiness," "chief architect of modernization in the new era," and so on.

Within the party, Xi's lineage is carrying out a fierce campaign insisting that he be allowed to stay in power to finish what he started: namely, "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

As their efforts intensify, their message is being simplified. In April, party officials in Guangxi proposed a new slogan: “Always support the leader, defend the leader, and follow the leader.” In an echo of Mao’s “little red book,” they also issued a pocket-size collection of Xi quotations and invited citizens to memorize its contents. Xi seems to be positioning himself not as merely a great party leader but as a modern-day emperor.

THE EMPEROR HAS NO CLOTHES

The more a political system centers on a single leader, the more the flaws and peculiarities of that leader matter. And in the case of Xi, the leader is thin-skinned, stubborn, and dictatorial.

These qualities were in evidence even before he took office. In 2008, Xi became president of the Central Party School, where I taught. At a faculty meeting the next year, the number two official at the school conveyed Xi’s threat to teachers that he would “never allow them to eat from the party’s rice bowl while attempting to smash the party’s cooking pot”—meaning taking government pay while discreetly criticizing the system. Angry about Xi’s absurd notion that it was the party, not Chinese taxpayers, that bankrolled the state, I talked back from my seat. “Whose rice bowl does the Communist Party eat from?” I asked out loud. “The Communist Party eats from the people’s rice bowl but smashes their cooking pot every day.” No one reported me; my fellow professors agreed with me.

Once in office, Xi proved unwilling to brook criticism. Xi uses Standing Committee and Politburo meetings not as an opportunity to hash out policies but as a chance to deliver hours-long monologues. According to official data, between November 2012 and February 2022, he called for 80 “collective study sessions,” in which he spoke at length on a given topic before the Politburo. He rejects any suggestions from subordinates that he thinks will make him look bad. According to an old friend of Wang Qishan, who as a Standing Committee member during Xi’s first term was part of the inner circle, Wang once proposed that Xi’s “eight-point regulation,” a list of requirements for party members, be made an official party rule. But even this rather sycophantic suggestion was considered an affront by Xi because he had not come up with it himself, and he rebuked Wang on the spot.

Xi is also a micromanager. He acts as “chairman of everything,” as many analysts have noted. In 2014, for example, he issued instructions on environmental protection 17 times—a remarkable degree of meddling, given all that is on his plate. Deng, Jiang, and Hu recognized that administering a country as vast as China requires taking local complexities into account. They emphasized that cadres at all levels should take instructions from the CCP’s Central Committee but adapt them to specific situations as needed. Such flexibility was crucial for economic development, since it gave local officials room to innovate. But Xi insists that his instructions be obeyed to the letter. I know of a county party chief who in 2014 tried to create an exception to the central government’s new rules on banquets because his county needed to host delegations of foreign investors. When Xi learned of the attempted innovation, he grew furious, accusing the official of “speaking ill of the CCP Central Committee’s policy”—a serious charge that, as a result of this incident, was subsequently codified in the party’s disciplinary regulations and is punishable by expulsion.

The CCP used to have a long tradition, dating back to Mao, in which cadres could write to the top leader with suggestions and even criticisms, but those who dared try this with Xi early in his tenure learned their lesson. Around 2017, Liu Yazhou, a general in the People’s Liberation Army and a son-in-law of a former president, wrote to Xi recommending that China reverse its

policy in Xinjiang and cease rounding up members of the Uyghur minority. He was warned not to speak ill of Xi's policies. Xi's refusal to accept such counsel removes an important method of self-correction.

Why, unlike his predecessors, is Xi so resistant to others' advice? Part of the reason, I suspect, is that he suffers from an inferiority complex, knowing that he is poorly educated in comparison with other top CCP leaders. Even though he studied chemical engineering at Tsinghua University, Xi attended as a "worker-peasant-soldier," a category of students admitted in the 1970s on the basis of political reliability and class background, not their academic merits. Jiang and Hu, by contrast, earned their spots in university through highly competitive exams. In 2002, when Xi was a provincial cadre, he received a doctoral degree in Marxist theory, also at Tsinghua, but as the British journalist Michael Sheridan has documented, Xi's dissertation was riddled with instances of suspected plagiarism. As I know from my time at the Central Party School, high-ranking officials routinely farm out their schoolwork to assistants while their professors turn a blind eye. Indeed, at the time he supposedly completed his dissertation, Xi held the busy job of governor of Fujian.

MR. WRONG

In any political system, unchecked power is dangerous. Detached from reality and freed from the constraint of consensus, a leader can act rashly, implementing policies that are unwise, unpopular, or both. Not surprisingly, then, Xi's know-it-all style of rule has led to a number of disastrous decisions. The common theme is an inability to grasp the practical effect of his directives.

Consider foreign policy. Breaking with Deng's dictum that China "hide its strength and bide its time," Xi has decided to directly challenge the United States and pursue a China-centric world order. That is why he has engaged in risky and aggressive behavior abroad, militarizing the South China Sea, threatening Taiwan, and encouraging his diplomats to engage in an abrasive style of foreign policy known as "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy. Xi has formed a de facto alliance with Russian President Vladimir Putin, further alienating China from the international community. His Belt and Road Initiative has generated growing resistance as countries tire of the associated debt and corruption.

Xi's economic policies are similarly counterproductive. The introduction of market reforms was one of the CCP's signature achievements, allowing hundreds of millions of Chinese to escape poverty. But when Xi came to power, he came to see the private sector as a threat to his rule and revived the planned economy of the Maoist era. He strengthened state-owned enterprises and established party organizations in the private sector that direct the way businesses are run. Under the guise of fighting corruption and enforcing antitrust law, he has plundered assets from private companies and entrepreneurs. Over the past few years, some of China's most dynamic companies, including the Anbang Insurance Group and the conglomerate HNA Group, have effectively been forced to hand over control of their businesses to the state. Others, such as the conglomerate Tencent and the e-commerce giant Alibaba, have been brought to heel through a combination of new regulations, investigations, and fines. In 2020, Sun Dawu, the billionaire owner of an agricultural conglomerate who had publicly criticized Xi for his crackdown on human rights lawyers, was arrested on false charges and soon sentenced to 18 years in prison. His business was sold to a hastily formed state company in a sham auction for a fraction of its true value.

Predictably, China has seen its economic growth slow, and most analysts believe it will slow even more in the coming years. Although several factors are at play—including U.S. sanctions against Chinese tech companies, the war in Ukraine, and the COVID-19 pandemic—the fundamental problem is the CCP’s interference in the economy. The government constantly meddles in the private sector to achieve political goals, a proven poison for productivity. Many Chinese entrepreneurs live in fear that their businesses will be seized or that they themselves will be detained, hardly the kind of mindset inclined to innovation. In April, as China’s growth prospects worsened, Xi hosted a meeting of the Politburo to unveil his remedy for the country’s economic woes: a combination of tax rebates, fee reductions, infrastructure investment, and monetary easing. But since none of these proposals solve the underlying problem of excessive state intervention in the economy, they are doomed to fail.

Nowhere has Xi’s desire for control been more disastrous than in his reaction to COVID-19. When the disease first spread in the city of Wuhan in December 2019, Xi withheld information about it from the public in an attempt to preserve the image of a flourishing China. Local officials, meanwhile, were paralyzed. As Wuhan’s mayor, Zhou Xianwang, admitted the next month on state television, without approval from above, he had been unable to publicly disclose the outbreak. When eight brave health professionals blew the whistle about it, the government detained and silenced them. One of the eight later revealed that he had been forced to sign a false confession.

Xi’s tendency to micromanage also inhibited his response to the pandemic. Instead of leaving the details of policy to the government’s health team, Xi insisted that he himself coordinate China’s efforts. Later, Xi would boast that he “personally commanded, planned the response, oversaw the general situation, acted decisively, and pointed the way forward.” To the extent that this was true, it was not for the better. In fact, his interference led to confusion and inaction, with local health officials receiving mixed messages from Beijing and refusing to act. As I learned from a source on the State Council (China’s chief administrative authority), Premier Li Keqiang proposed activating an emergency-response protocol in early January 2020, but Xi refused to approve it for fear of spoiling the ongoing Chinese New Year celebrations.

When the Omicron variant of the virus surged in Shanghai in February 2022, Xi yet again chose a baffling way to respond. The details of the decision-making process were relayed to me by a contact who works at the State Council. In an online gathering of about 60 pandemic experts held shortly after the outbreak began, everyone agreed that if Shanghai simply followed the latest official guidelines, which relaxed the quarantine requirements, then life in the city could go on more or less as usual. Many of the city’s party and health officials were on board with this approach. But when Xi heard about it, he became furious. Refusing to listen to the experts, he insisted on enforcing his “zero COVID” policy. Shanghai’s tens of millions of residents were forbidden from going outside, even to get groceries or receive life-saving health care. Some died at the gates of hospitals; others leaped to their deaths from their apartment buildings.

Just like that, a modern, prosperous city was turned into the site of a humanitarian disaster, with people starving and babies separated from their parents. A leader more open to influence or subject to greater checks would not likely have implemented such a draconian policy, or at least would have corrected course once its costs and unpopularity became evident. But for Xi, backtracking would have been an unthinkable admission of error.

ACTION, REACTION

The CCP's leadership has never been a monolith. As Mao once said, "There are parties outside our party, and there are factions within our party, and this has always been the case." The main organizing principle of these factions is personal ties, but these groups tend to array themselves on a left-to-right continuum. Put differently, although Chinese politics are largely personalistic, there are real differences over the direction of national policy, and each lineage tends to associate itself with the ideas of its progenitor.

On the left are those who remain committed to orthodox Marxism. This faction dominated the party before the Deng era, and it advocates the continuation of class struggle and violent revolution. It includes subfactions named for Mao, Chen Yun (who was the second most powerful official under Deng), Bo Xilai (a former Politburo member who was sidelined and imprisoned before Xi took power), and Xi himself. At the grassroots level, the left also includes a small, politically powerless contingent of Marxist university students, as well as workers who were laid off as a result of Deng's reforms.

The center consists mainly of Deng's political descendants. Because most of today's cadres were trained under him, this is the faction that dominates the CCP bureaucracy. Centrists support full-throated economic reforms and limited political reforms, all with the goal of ensuring the party's permanent rule. Also in the center is a group descended from two retired top officials, Jiang and Zeng Qinghong (a former vice president), as well as a group called the Youth League Faction, consisting of supporters of former party leader Hu Jintao and the current premier Li.

Last are the subfactions on the right, which in the Chinese context means liberals who advocate a market economy and a softer form of authoritarianism (or even, in some cases, constitutional democracy). This camp, which I belong to, is the least powerful of the three. It includes followers of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, party leaders under Deng. It also arguably includes Wen Jiabao, who was China's premier from 2003 to 2013 and still wields influence. When asked about his push for political reform in a 2010 interview, Wen responded, "I will not yield until the last day of my life."

Xi faces growing opposition from all three factions. The left, while initially supportive of his policies, now thinks he has not gone far enough in reviving Mao's policies, with some having become disenchanted after he cracked down on the labor movement. The center resents Xi's undoing of economic reforms. And the right has been completely silenced by Xi's elimination of even the slightest political debate.

Glimpses of these divides can be seen in the Standing Committee. One member, Han Zheng, is widely perceived as a member of Jiang's faction. Li in particular seems to diverge from Xi, and a row between the officials is breaking out into public view. Li has long quietly opposed Xi's zero-COVID policy, stressing the need to reopen businesses and protect the economy. In May, after Li told 100,000 party cadres at an online conference that the economy was in worse shape than expected, Xi's allies launched a counterattack. In Xinhua, they defended him by arguing, "China's economic development prospects will definitely be brighter." As a symbol of their resistance to Xi's COVID policy, Li and his entourage refuse to wear masks. In April, during a speech in the city of Nanchang, Li's aides could be seen asking attendees to remove their masks. So far, Li has taken Xi's imperiousness sitting down, always acquiescing out of necessity. But he may soon reach a breaking point.

Indignation at the elite level is replicating itself further down the bureaucracy. Early in Xi's tenure, as he began to shuffle power, many in the bureaucracy grew disgruntled and

disillusioned. But their resistance was passive, expressed through inaction. Local cadres took sick leave en masse or came up with excuses to stall Xi's anticorruption initiatives. At the end of 2021, the CCP's disciplinary commission announced that in the first ten months of that year, it had found 247,000 cases of "ineffective implementation of Xi Jinping's and the Central Committee's important instructions." During the Shanghai lockdown, however, resistance became more overt. On social media, local officials openly criticized the zero-COVID policy. In April, members of the residents' committee of Sanlin Town, a neighborhood in Shanghai, collectively resigned, complaining in an open letter that they had been sealed in their offices for 24 days with no access to their families.

Even more troubling for Xi, elite dissatisfaction is now spreading to the general public. In an authoritarian state, it is impossible to accurately measure public opinion, but Xi's harsh COVID measures may well have lost him the affection of most Chinese. An early note of dissent came in February 2020, when the real estate tycoon Ren Zhiqiang called him a "clown" for bungling the response to the pandemic. (After a one-day trial, Ren was sentenced to 18 years in prison.) Chinese social media platforms are awash in videos in which ordinary people beg Xi to end his zero-COVID policy. In May, a group calling itself the "Shanghai Self-Saving Autonomous Committee" released a manifesto online titled, "Don't be a slave—save yourself." The document called on the city's residents to fight the lockdown and form self-governing bodies to help one another. On social media, some Chinese have sarcastically proposed that the most effective plan for fighting the pandemic would be to convene the 20th National Congress as soon as possible to prevent Xi from staying in power.

Meanwhile, despite Xi's claims of having vanquished poverty, most Chinese continue to struggle to make ends meet. As Li revealed in 2020, 600 million people in China—some 40 percent of its population—barely earned \$140 a month. According to data obtained by the South China Morning Post, a Hong Kong newspaper, some 4.4 million small businesses closed between January and November 2021, more than three times the number of newly registered companies in the same period. Facing a financial crisis, local governments have been forced to slash government salaries—sometimes by as much as 50 percent, including pay for teachers. They will likely resort to finding new ways of plundering wealth from the private sector and ordinary citizens, in turn generating even more economic misery. After four decades of opening up, most Chinese don't want to go back to the days of Mao. Within the CCP elite, many resent Xi's disruption of the traditional power distribution and think his reckless policies are jeopardizing the future of the party. The result is that for the first time since the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, China's leader is facing not only internal dissent but also an intense popular backlash and a real risk of social unrest.

FIVE MORE YEARS?

Harboring resentment is one thing, but acting on it is another. Members of the party's upper echelons know that they can always be charged with corruption, so they have little incentive to maneuver against Xi. High-tech surveillance is presumed to be so pervasive that party elites, including retired national leaders, do not dare communicate with one another outside official events, even about mundane matters. The public, for its part, stays silent, held back by censorship, surveillance, and the fear of arrest. That is why opponents of Xi are focused on the one legal avenue for removing him: denying him a third presidential term at the upcoming National Congress.

Perhaps sensing the growing disappointment, Xi has done everything he can to tilt the playing field in his favor. The most important constituency, of course, is his fellow Standing Committee members, who ultimately have the greatest say over whether he stays in office, in part because of their control over members of China's legislature. Xi has likely done what he can to ensure the support of Standing Committee members, from promising that they will stay in power to pledging not to investigate their families.

Nearly as important is the military, since denying Xi a third term would likely require the support of the generals. Propagandists routinely remind Chinese that "the party commands the gun," but China's leaders realize that in truth the gun is always pointed at the party's head. Although Xi has steadily replaced China's generals with his own men over the years, military officials' rhetoric still wavers between emphasizing personal loyalty to Xi and institutional loyalty to the Central Military Commission, the body, headed by Xi, that oversees them.

In one potential sign of lingering opposition within the ranks, I learned last December from several of my contacts in China that Liu, the military official whom Xi had rebuked for criticizing policy on the Uyghurs—had disappeared along with his younger brother, also a general. Both brothers' houses were raided. The news sent shock waves through the military, since as the son-in-law of a former president, Liu would normally have been considered untouchable. But by detaining him and his brother, Xi had issued his strongest warning yet to princelings and the top brass of the People's Liberation Army that they should get in line.

Xi has also ramped up his ostensible anticorruption drive. In the first half of 2022, the government has punished 21 cadres at or above the provincial ministerial level and 1,237 cadres at the district and departmental level. There has been a distinct focus on the security and intelligence agencies. In January, Chinese state television aired a confession by Sun Lijun, once a high-ranking security official, who had been charged with corruption and now faces the prospect of execution. His sin, according to the party's top disciplinary body, was that he had "formed a cabal to take control over several key departments," "harbored hugely inflated political ambitions," and had "evil political qualities." In March, Fu Zhenghua, who as deputy minister of public security had been Sun's boss, was also charged with corruption, removed from office, and expelled from the CCP. The message was clear: obey or risk downfall.

Adding extra layers of insurance to his quest for a third term, Xi has issued a veiled threat to retired party cadres. Party elders have long wielded enormous clout in Chinese politics; it was retired elites who forced out Zhao in 1989, for example. In January, Xi took direct aim at this group, announcing that the government would "clean up systemic corruption and eliminate hidden risks" by retroactively investigating the past 20 years of cadres' lives. And in May, the party tightened the guidelines for retired cadres, warning them "not to discuss the general policies of the party Central Committee in an open manner, not to spread politically negative remarks, not to participate in the activities of illegal social organizations, and not to use their former authority or position influence to seek benefits for themselves and others, and to resolutely oppose and resist all kinds of wrong thinking."

Xi has also sought to guarantee the backing of the 2,300 CCP delegates invited to attend the National Congress, two-thirds of whom are high-level officials from across the country and one-third of whom are ordinary members who work at the grassroots level. The delegates have been carefully screened for their loyalty to Xi. And to prevent any surprises at the congress, a ban on "nonorganizational activities" forbids them from mingling outside of formal small-group

meetings of their provincial delegations, limiting their ability to organize against a particular policy or leader.

In the months leading up to the congress, the CCP's stealth infighting will probably intensify. Xi could order more arrests and more trials of high-ranking officials, and his critics could leak more information and spread more rumors. Contrary to the conventional wisdom among Western analysts, he may not have locked up a third term. Xi's proliferating opponents could succeed in ushering him out of office, provided they either convince enough Standing Committee members that he has lost the support of the CCP's rank and file or persuade party elders to intervene. And there is always a chance that an economic crisis or widespread social unrest could turn even stalwart allies against him. Despite all this, the most likely outcome this fall is that Xi, having so rigged the process and intimidated his rivals, will get his third presidential term and, with it, the right to continue as head of the party and the military for another term. And just like that, the only meaningful political reform made since Deng's rule will go up in smoke.

XI UNBOUND

What then? Xi will no doubt see his victory as a mandate to do whatever he wants to achieve the party's stated goal of rejuvenating China. His ambitions will rise to new heights. In a futile attempt to invigorate the economy without empowering the private sector, Xi will double down on his statist economic policies. To maintain his grip on power, he will continue to preemptively eliminate any potential rivals and tighten social control, making China look increasingly like North Korea. Xi might even try to stay in power well beyond a third term. An emboldened Xi may well accelerate his militarization of disputed areas of the South China Sea and try to forcibly take over Taiwan. As he continues China's quest for dominance, he will further its isolation from the rest of the world.

But none of these moves would make discontent within the party magically disappear. The feat of gaining a third term would not mollify those within the CCP who resent his accumulation of power and reject his cult of personality, nor would it solve his growing legitimacy problem among the people. In fact, the moves he would likely make in a third term would raise the odds of war, social unrest, and economic crisis, exacerbating existing grievances. Even in China, it takes more than sheer force and intimidation to stay in power; performance still matters. Mao and Deng earned their authority through accomplishments—Mao by liberating China from the Nationalists, and Deng by opening it up and unleashing an economic boom. But Xi can point to no such concrete triumphs. He has less margin for error.

The only viable way of changing course, so far as I can see, is also the scariest and deadliest: a humiliating defeat in a war. If Xi were to attack Taiwan, his likeliest target, there is a good chance that the war would not go as planned, and Taiwan, with American help, would be able to resist invasion and inflict grave damage on mainland China. In that event, the elites and the masses would abandon Xi, paving the way for not only his personal downfall but perhaps even the collapse of the CCP as we know it. For precedent, one would have to go back to the nineteenth century, when Emperor Qianlong failed in his quest to expand China's realm to Central Asia, Burma, and Vietnam. Predictably, China suffered a mortifying loss in the First Sino-Japanese War, setting the stage for the downfall of the Qing dynasty and kicking off a long period of political upheaval. Emperors are not always forever.

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