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China in Xi's "New Era"

THE RETURN TO PERSONALISTIC RULE

Susan L. Shirk

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After Mao Zedong died at the age of 82 in 1976, his successors deliberately crafted a system that they hoped would prevent the rise of another dictator. Mao had turned against other leaders and put the nation at risk through irrational schemes. Deng Xiaoping, Mao's former comrade-in-arms who had twice been purged by him, did not blame Mao as an individual for the tragic mistakes of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and the Great Leap Forward (1958–62). Instead, Deng targeted the systemic source of the problem: "Over-concentration of power is liable to give rise to arbitrary rule by individuals at the expense of collective leadership."¹

Deng and his colleagues introduced fixed terms of office, term limits, and a mandatory retirement age; delegated authority from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to government agencies under the State Council (the cabinet of the People's Republic of China [PRC]); and started holding regular meetings of CCP institutions such as the Central Committee as well as the Politburo and its Standing Committee (the inner rings of power). All these moves were meant to decentralize authority, regularize political life, and check dictatorial power.

The centerpiece of the effort to prevent dictatorship and regularize political competition was the practice of peaceful leadership succession. Students of authoritarianism often identify leadership succession as its "Achilles heel"—a weak point that threatens regime stability by breeding power struggles and sclerotic leadership. When Jiang Zemin voluntarily retired from the post of CCP general secretary in 2002 (followed by his stepping down as president in 2003 and military chief in 2004),

it was the first time that any ruler of a communist nation had left office without dying or being deposed by a coup. After Jiang, Hu Jintao served ten years in the three top offices, then voluntarily retired from all those positions in 2012 and 2013. Peaceful and regular premortem leadership succession has been a remarkable political achievement and the most important source of what Andrew Nathan has called China's "authoritarian resilience."²

Yet today, after decades of collective leadership, Xi Jinping is taking China back to personalistic leadership. By the end of his first five-year term, Xi had consolidated greater personal power than Jiang or Hu had ever held. Xi broke precedent by not promoting a successor-in-training at the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 2017. And in March 2018 the National People's Congress (or NPC, China's legislature) changed the state constitution to abolish the two-term limit for the president—a clear sign that Xi is planning to stay on beyond 2023.

China in the twenty-first century is a vibrant modern economy and society open to the world, with a large and well-educated urban middle class. Many people inside and outside the country expected its political system to follow the historical example of other authoritarian regimes by gradually institutionalizing governance to make it more accountable, responsive, and law-bound. Until 2012, that is essentially what happened. But under Xi Jinping, China is making a U-turn. Personalistic rule is back.

Why have the institutional rules and precedents laid down since Deng Xiaoping's time failed to prevent the rise of another Mao-like strongman, with all the risks that implies? In institutionalizing collective leadership after Mao, the CCP was taking the path followed earlier by communist parties in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.³ Those parties adapted to suit the needs of economic and social modernization, but in the end they lost power and today are no more. Xi Jinping is determined to avert such a fate for the CCP, so he has turned in the opposite direction. His unexpected reversion to strongman rule suggests that the change from personalism to institutionalized collective leadership in authoritarian regimes is cyclical, not evolutionary.

Xi Jinping has grasped all the levers of power in the Party and the state (including the military and police). The Party has reclaimed the authority over economic policy that it delegated to the state starting in the 1980s. Echoing vintage-1962 Mao, the 2017 Party Congress declared that "East-West North-South the Party is leading everything." The Leading Small Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reform, chaired by Xi with three other Politburo Standing Committee members as vice chairs, has become a more powerful shadow State Council, usually meeting monthly and issuing specific policies on a wide range of issues, including economic ones.⁴ Heads of government bodies now regularly report to the Politburo Standing Committee.

Within the Party, Xi acts as if he is personally in charge of everything. He chairs eight of the leading small groups including the National Security Commission. Xi also handles internal security directly, thereby reducing the chances of a coup.

Xi's hold on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is even more complete than his hold on the CCP and the government. As Tai Ming Cheung has observed, "No other Chinese Communist Party leader, not even Mao Zedong, has controlled the military to the same extent as Xi does today. Mao had to share power with powerful revolutionary-era marshals."⁵ To show how "hands-on" he is, Xi has taken the new post of commander-in-chief of the PLA Joint Battle Command. One officer told me that whereas generals administered the PLA under Hu, Xi runs it himself. The People's Armed Police, responsible for putting down civil unrest, used to be under the joint control of the CCP Central Military Commission and the State Council. Now the Military Commission, headed by Xi, has sole charge of China's paramilitary police.

Xi's first term saw an unprecedented campaign against official corruption and Party indiscipline. Through this crackdown he cleaned up the CCP—and purged his rivals. As of late 2017, the CCP Central Discipline Commission had punished almost 1.4 million Party members. They included seventeen full and seventeen alternate Central Committee members, a pair of sitting Politburo members, an ex-member of the Politburo Standing Committee, and more than a hundred generals and admirals. The main goal, said Xi, was to restore public respect for the Party. It was a matter of "survival or extinction."⁶ Xi has also begun using the Discipline Commission against local officials who fail to carry out top-down economic and environmental policies. As of 2018, a new body under Xi's de facto control called the National Supervision Commission will press the campaign beyond Party members to everyone who works for the state or its affiliates. This will include professors, doctors, and executives of state-owned enterprises.

The crackdown gave Xi weapons to eliminate potential rivals, erase competing power centers, and enforce through fear the absolute loyalty of the political elite to the CCP and to himself. When it comes to sharing power with other Party leaders, the contrast between Xi and his predecessor Hu Jintao could not be more striking. Hu let senior CCP figures govern their own policy domains and build their own patronage networks. Xi Jinping has been systematically demolishing the organizational bases for patronage networks controlled by others.

During his first term, Xi used the Discipline Commission to purge six powerful leaders for alleged coup attempts. Without giving details, he publicly charged them with plotting to seize power through "anti-Party activity." Those who went down included not only former security czar and Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang but also Politburo member Bo Xilai, former top Hu aide Ling Jihua, senior

generals Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, and Sun Zhengcai, a Politburo member and potential successor who was purged just before the Party Congress in October 2017.

Xi Jinping is preoccupied with shoring up loyalty to the Party and himself. Despite his apparent grip on power, his insecurity is glaring.

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In a January 2018 speech, Xi called on all officials to remain loyal to the Party "at any time, and under any circumstance."⁷ He has revived Mao's practice of requiring all Party officials, including major provincial leaders and the Politburo, to engage in criticism and self-criticism and pledge loyalty (*biaotai*) to the Party's central apparatus and to his position as its core.⁸ These rituals serve not only to flatter Xi, but also to impede other politicians from organizing collectively against

his rule. Party members in general are told to shun any "improper discussion" (*wangyi*) that questions central policies,⁹ and the recruitment of new members now requires stricter loyalty standards. The overriding concerns are with reinforcing Xi's authority and keeping the Party in line behind him.

A documentary about the fall of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) that all CCP members are required to watch makes clear that Xi fears the political elite more than the masses. According to the film, even as the Soviet public continued overwhelmingly to support the CPSU, corrupt and ideologically confused leaders such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin destroyed it from the top down.¹⁰

Xi has also turned left ideologically, striking fear into intellectuals, journalists, and private businesspeople. Since 2013, the CCP has officially banned media and classroom discussion of seven topics associated with Western values that are considered subversive: universalism, press freedom, judicial independence, civil society, citizens' rights, the historical mistakes of the Party, and cronyism within elite financial and political circles.¹¹ University professors who are Party members must defend the CCP in class if anyone criticizes it. Western textbooks are banned and being replaced with new indigenous versions that emphasize Marxism.

At all levels of schooling, more time is now being devoted to mandatory politics courses. Schools of Marxism are enjoying a renaissance on campuses all over the country. "Virtuocracy" has returned; getting ahead at school and work again depends at least in part on one's "redness."¹² Public intellectuals with popular blogs have faced arrest, and some of them have been forced to make humiliating televised confes-

sions that call to mind the Cultural Revolution. Xi, meanwhile, gives speeches promoting a rosy view of the Mao era that no one outside the hard-left fringes has voiced in thirty years.

Under Xi, the CCP's stability-maintenance machine has become more efficient and more totalitarian. Censorship was once fragmented across agencies, with cracks that nimble journalists and netizens could exploit to circulate information. Now the censors are more consolidated and centralized. A potent new Cyber Administration, run by a leading small group that Xi chairs, aims to win what the general secretary calls the "struggle for public opinion."

Editors of online news sites report that censorship has become more granular and efficient. The censors have hounded critical voices off Sina Weibo, China's version of Twitter, and are now showing the ability to penetrate circles of friends who message one another on WeChat. Getting around the Great Firewall to access foreign media has become harder than ever. As a result of the near-total control over information not only would large-scale protests be more difficult to organize, but also any potential rivals to Xi would find it tougher to gather a mass following.

Efforts to promote CCP propaganda have intensified. Xi has called for the arts, media, and internet to strengthen popular support for the Party. In 2016, he visited the three main official news organizations (Xinhua, *People's Daily*, and CCTV) to ask journalists to pledge loyalty to the Party and to him. He demanded that "official media make the Party their surname," and insisted that they "strictly adhere to the news viewpoint of Marxism" and "rebuild people's trust in the Party"—two requirements that may be mutually contradictory.¹³

Xi has also been tightening the Party's centralized social control through law. The Party has always managed the courts, but now central or provincial CCP authorities—not local Party figures—appoint judges. Sweeping new laws reinforce the Party's power over domestic and foreign NGOs, national security, and cybersecurity. In July 2015, about three-hundred lawyers whose only crime was helping citizens to defend their rights under existing Chinese law were detained on charges of "subverting state power." This is not the rule of law that Chinese reformers once envisioned. Instead, it is Communist Party rule by law.

By the end of his first term, Xi had consolidated greater personal authority than Jiang or Hu had ever held. Xi was anointed the "core" of the Party leadership, a title that Deng had given to Jiang Zemin but was never granted to Hu Jintao. Xi's personal contribution to Party ideology, "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era," was incorporated in the CCP constitution during his time in office, an honor accorded to no one since Mao. After obsequious officials started calling him the great "Leader" (*lingxiu*), an appellation as-

sociated with Mao, the Politburo picked it up, calling Xi a Leader “loved and esteemed by the people.”¹⁴

Official media overflow with articles extolling Xi’s virtues and putting him on a level with Mao and Deng. Often repeated is the saying, “Under Mao the Chinese people stood up (*zhanqilai*); under Deng the Chinese people got rich (*fuqilai*); and under Xi the Chinese people are becoming stronger (*qiangqilai*).” Jiang and Hu, meanwhile, have become invisible. The Xi personality cult is gathering steam as Xi seeks, in the words of historian Rana Mitter, to “centralize as much authority and charisma under his own person” as he can.¹⁵

The Nineteenth Party Congress

The Nineteenth Party Congress was a stress test of the CCP’s political institutionalization. Would the rules and precedents of collective leadership be able to constrain a leader as ambitious as Xi?

The answer, it appears, is both yes and no. Scenarios in which the Congress would become a launch pad to extreme dictatorship failed to materialize. Xi did not emerge from the meeting with Mao’s old title of CCP chairman. And Xi opted to retain the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee rather than get rid of it and rule through the Party Secretariat. The customary retirement age of 68 was strictly applied, even though it required Xi’s close ally and Discipline Commission head Wang Qishan to step down. The Party, State Council, provinces, and military were represented in the Politburo according to the same proportions as in the past.¹⁶

Continuing the practice followed by each of the four Party Congresses since 1997, the Nineteenth Congress produced a Politburo Standing Committee composed entirely of the most senior members of the Politburo. Xi did see to it that nine of the fifteen new Politburo members were family friends and former colleagues of his, but he did not pack the Politburo Standing Committee with his close allies. The current Standing Committee includes two figures from the Jiang-affiliated Shanghai bureaucracy and two associated with Hu. Xi may hope that sticking to some of the rules and creating a factional balance at the apex of power will shield him against a backlash from CCP elites who resent him for stripping away their patronage powers and jeopardizing their security.

Xi may need shielding, for the Nineteenth Congress openly proclaimed his elevated status. Being called Leader and having “Xi Jinping Thought” written into the CCP constitution fall into this category. The effect only intensified in March 2018, when the NPC similarly amended the constitution of the People’s Republic. Xi’s personal status as the Party’s Leader is the main theme of the propaganda preaching (*xuanji-ang*) on the Nineteenth Congress that is underway in schools and offices throughout the country.

Most significant, however, was Xi's decision to break with precedent by not appointing a "successor-in-training" to be groomed for the top job. Both Xi himself and Hu Jintao had been picked to assume power five years or more ahead of time. The absence of a chosen successor, and the amending of the state constitution to abolish term limits for the president a few months later, were a shocking declaration of Xi's intention to rule into the indefinite future. Ignoring Deng Xiaoping's warnings and flouting the hard-won practice of predictable leadership succession is a bold move that both demonstrates Xi's power and injects greater uncertainty and tension into the political system.

The lack of a successor-in-training makes it unlikely that the precedent of naming a younger leader to the Central Military Commission halfway through the second term will be followed. Xi therefore will remain the only civilian with any authority over the PLA and the People's Armed Police.

The legitimacy of Xi's leadership within the Party was weakened by the Nineteenth Congress's move away from nominating leaders on the basis of voting in straw polls. The CCP Central Committee has about two-hundred full members who form the "selectorate" that the CCP constitution authorizes to elect the Party's top leaders.¹⁷ In 2007 and 2012, the Central Committee held straw polls before the formal vote. These informal votes represented a small step toward intraparty democracy, even though the results were kept secret and were only advisory; final nominations were determined by a set of current and retired leaders whose precise composition remains unknown. Still, the straw polls boosted the legitimacy of those chosen while cutting the risk that a nominee would lose the formal vote. Xi Jinping is widely believed to have been chosen as Hu Jintao's successor because Xi earned more votes than Li Keqiang in the 2007 straw poll.

This time, however, Xi sought to keep control over the nomination process by replacing voting with interviews.¹⁸ Xi solicited elite opinions in 57 interviews with senior officials, the Politburo Standing Committee members interviewed 258 ministers, and the Military Commission interviewed 32 military officers. Xinhua praised this process as more free, fair, and democratic than the straw polls, which it claimed had been marred by canvassing, haphazard voting, voting based on personal ties, and even bribery. By replacing the straw polls with interviewing by the boss, Xi Jinping further eroded the elite's confidence in his willingness to share power with them.

Why is the CCP heading back to personalistic rule after more than thirty years of institutionalized collective leadership? What has foiled Deng Xiaoping's plan to prevent the overconcentration of authority? Why are the rules governing leadership competition inadequate to constrain an ambitious leader such as Xi Jinping? I would point to the following six factors:

1) *The rules concerning the CCP general secretary's retirement are unwritten.* By instituting mandatory retirement and terms limits in the Party, the state, and the military, Deng threw open the doors of opportunity to younger officials and gave China a system of brisk elite turnover. Written rules specify retirement ages for government, military, and Party officials at various levels and mandate universal term limits: five years a term, with each official able to serve in the same position for no more than two terms, and the same leadership rank for no more than three terms.¹⁹

Yet the rules governing leadership turnover at the apex of power within the Party are unwritten. Neither the CCP constitution nor any other document fixes retirement ages or term limits for members of the Central Committee, Politburo, and Politburo Standing Committee, or for the general secretary himself.²⁰

The retirement age for Party leaders has been lowered over time as a convenient tactic for eliminating rivals. In 1997, Jiang Zemin got rid of Qiao Shi by making 70 the retirement age for Politburo-level officials, and then exempting himself despite being 71 years old. The Politburo retirement age became 68 in 2002 as a means of forcing the popular Li Ruihuan off the Standing Committee. Since then, 68 has been the consistently observed retirement age, but there is no written rule that makes it so. Hu Jintao's advisors had hoped that he would write the two-term limit for the Party general secretary into the CCP constitution to match the limit that the PRC constitution imposes on the president, but he never did so. Now that the constitution has been revised to abolish the two-term limit for the president, there is no rule blocking Xi Jinping's obvious ambition to rule for life.

2) *Retired leaders still exercise informal influence.* Deng Xiaoping sought to strengthen CCP institutions and to make leadership turnovers a regular thing, yet even while relinquishing official posts he remained the de facto preeminent leader until shortly before his death in 1997 from Parkinson's disease at the age of 92. The influence wielded by a retired senior leader—and especially a former CCP general secretary—although diminished since Deng's time, remains formidable. Jiang Zemin's interventions in personnel matters under Hu received blame as a cause of growing high-level corruption in government, the military, and the CCP.

Retired leaders also can have a beneficial effect, however. Under term limits, the informal dynamics between the retired and current top leaders, as well as between the current leader and his successor-in-training, can help to check dictatorial tendencies and ease the sharing of power and patronage within the elite. As Beijing University political scientist Xiao Ma puts it, "This evolving bargain over allocation of political power among multiple generations of leaders further keeps any one faction from dominating the others."²¹

But there is no intergenerational bargain constraining Xi Jinping. Jiang Zemin is 91 and hobbled politically by age. Hu Jintao, a far more self-effacing figure than Jiang, stays out of Xi Jinping's way. Moreover, there is no preappointed successor with whom Xi must share the elite's loyalty. The constellation of forces in elite politics is severely skewed in Xi's favor.

3) *The Tiananmen crisis exerts a lingering effect.* In 1989, demonstrators protesting inflation and corruption took to the streets in more than 130 cities across China. The CCP's leaders split on how to respond. Some urged dialogue to address the protestors' concerns, while others favored a **hard line**. The widespread unrest and open divisions at the top drove the political system to the brink of collapse. In the end, CCP rule survived only because the army followed Deng Xiaoping's orders and used force against the demonstrators.

After the crackdown, influential CCP figures including retired leaders blamed the close call on the Party's having given up too much control through ill-advised delegation and decentralization. They took aim at the separation of the work of government agencies from the Party that had reached a high point in 1987, when a constitutional change eliminated CCP groups within ministries. There had even been talk of trying to create a professional civil service outside the Party's appointment powers. Following Tiananmen, the Party revised the constitution to restore Party groups within ministries and put state officials on a shorter leash. This reversal smoothed the way for the CCP under Xi to reclaim policy-making authority from the State Council.

China's model of fused leadership, in which a single person serves as general secretary of the CCP, president of the PRC, and chairman of the Central Military Commission, is another product of the Tiananmen crisis. Before 1989, state president had been a mere title, and Deng Xiaoping had run the Military Commission without being CCP general secretary. After the crisis, when Deng picked Shanghai CCP boss Jiang Zemin to succeed cashiered general secretary Zhao Ziyang (put under house arrest for being soft on protesters and overdoing political reforms), Deng gave Jiang the title of "core leader" plus the three top jobs. The idea was to bolster Jiang's position in the face of political foes who might undercut him. Contrasting China's fused leadership with Vietnam's collective leadership, which divides authority among the Communist Party general secretary, the premier, and the president, **highlights the long-lasting centralizing effects of China's Tiananmen crisis.**²²

4) *There is no enforcement outside the Chinese Communist Party.* Even as he was working to make the CCP and its rule more institutional, Deng Xiaoping had a line he would not cross: "No Western-style separation of powers."²³ This aversion to giving the legislature or courts

authority to check the power of the CCP or its leader meant that the institutionalization project from its outset had a built-in limit.

Today, the National People's Congress passes more legislation—and its lawmakers take their responsibilities more seriously—than before. But China's national legislature remains under CCP domination. The courts, while offering channels for redress of citizen grievances, still **operate under the thumb of Party authorities.** The CCP's central apparatus appoints the members of the NPC Standing Committee and the judges of the Supreme People's Court. Neither institution has exercised authority over the actions of Party officials.

5) Communist parties have an “ambiguity of authority” problem.

With no institution outside the CCP able to check the behavior of Party leaders, this duty falls to the collective institutions of the Party, in particular the Central Committee. But the locus of authority within communist parties is difficult to pin down because of the relationship between the top leaders and the Central Committee that I call “reciprocal accountability.”²⁴ China's political system looks like a hierarchy in which the top CCP leaders name subordinate officials of the CCP, the government, and the military. Yet according to the CCP's constitution, the Central Committee has formal authority to elect the Politburo, Standing Committee, and general secretary, making the top leaders accountable to a broader political elite. All Central Committee members, however, hold concurrent jobs in the Party, government, or military—and have those jobs by appointment of top Party leaders.

The lines of authority and accountability thus flow in both directions, much like the relationship between the pope and the College of Cardinals in the Vatican. The CCP general secretary's authority, however, is less constrained by reciprocal accountability than that of the pope; the cardinals have voting tenure (that is, they can serve in the conclave that elects a new pope, since 1945 by fully secret ballot) until the fixed retirement age of 80. Members of the CCP Central Committee, by contrast, serve at the pleasure of the general secretary and the Politburo Standing Committee.

Over time, the Central Committee's composition has become more stable. The CCP National Congress, meeting every five years, elects the Central Committee in a ballot that has approximately 8 percent more nominees than the number of seats. The number of seats, although not fixed in writing, has settled at approximately 370: There are 204 full members and 166 alternates. The Central Committee has come to have a rough “job-slot representation,” in which certain jobs such as provincial Party secretary and governor carry Central Committee membership with them.

Since 1997, the balance among the main blocs has remained steady at these approximate proportions: provincial officials, 45 percent; central-government officials, 25 percent; officials of the central CCP apparatus,

18 percent; and the PLA, 10 percent.²⁵ The weight of numbers that provincial politicians enjoy in the Central Committee helps to explain why Beijing often has a hard time implementing policies unfavorable to provincial financial or economic interests. Under reciprocal accountability, these officials are not mere agents of the Party center.

The Central Committee's ability to stop a CCP leader from ruling dictatorially or making policy misjudgments, however, is limited by its unwieldy processes (it lacks a committee structure) and infrequent meetings (in the past five years it has met just seven times). It operates in secret and has no accountability to the public. Given such circumstances, which are common among ruling communist parties, it is hardly surprising that central committees rarely assert their authority. Instead, small groups of executives at the top make all decisions. As Deng noted in 1980, there is a "tradition of a high degree of concentration of power in the hands of individual leaders of communist parties in various countries."²⁶

6) *There were failures of collective leadership under Hu Jintao.*

Power-sharing under collective leadership may boost the resilience of an authoritarian regime, but it can have its drawbacks. Under Hu, the general secretary was only first among equals; each member of the Politburo Standing Committee had authority over his own policy domain. The design was purposeful. As the 2007 Party Congress communiqué explained, collective leadership was "a system with a division of responsibilities among individual leaders in an effort to prevent arbitrary decision-making by a single top leader."²⁷ Yet collective leadership led to obvious problems: Policy coordination was poor, corruption was rampant, and dangerous rifts split the leadership. When Xi took over in 2012, both the elite and the public at large welcomed his more forceful leadership.

Hu comes in for much criticism within China as a weak figure who never fully escaped Jiang Zemin's continuing interference. Certainly, Hu's modest personality inclined him more to collective leadership than to taking charge. But he also was sincerely committed to improving Chinese governance and making collective leadership work. He instituted performance-based promotions, experimented with intra-Party democracy, and studied the Vietnamese model of dividing the highest posts among different leaders rather than having one person fill them all. Yet Hu's results were disappointing, particularly during his second term: Economic reforms stalled while key domestic and foreign policies suffered from poor coordination and erratic changes of course.

The problem was not so much indecisiveness as a failure to rein in the parochial interest groups within the Party, the government, and the military. Hu and the other senior leaders were reluctant to question one another's actions for fear of opening splits in the oligarchy. Instead, they

achieved consensus through a kind of logrolling process.²⁸ In China, bureaucratic interest groups are “stovepiped”—they exist as separate vertical organizations that reach from Beijing down to the provinces and cities, neither communicating with one another nor inclined to embrace much discipline or coordination from above. Instead, each bureaucracy has its highly placed patron in the Politburo Standing Committee, and pushes for a bigger budget, more staff, and wider influence. As experts on U.S. politics would put it, no one was watching out for the “party label,” that is, the standing of the CCP as a whole.

The most conspicuous failure of the Hu era was the massive corruption that this decentralized system allowed high-ranking politicians and military officers to get away with. Official corruption angered the public, which enthusiastically welcomed Xi’s determination to end the dishonest dealings of both “tigers” and “flies.”

The leadership split that broke into the open on the eve of Xi’s 2012 ascension to power dramatized the strengthening of centrifugal forces under collective leadership and made the case for a stronger leader to enforce Party unity. Bo Xilai, the Party secretary in Chongqing and a Politburo member, had violated elite norms by building a public following through a combination of economic populism, a highly publicized law-and-order campaign, and nostalgia for the Mao era (Bo liked to tweet Mao quotes at his followers). Neither Hu nor the Standing Committee as a whole had the gumption to stop Bo’s open campaigning for power.

In February 2012, things went off the rails. Bo’s police chief, having fallen out with his patron and fearing for his personal safety, disguised himself and drove three hours to the U.S. consulate in Chengdu with information about the possible role of Bo’s wife in the murder of a British businessman. With the United States and Britain involved, the Party’s central leaders could no longer ignore the case, so they used it to bring Bo down. He was detained on suspicion of corruption, and his wife faced a murder charge. Both were eventually convicted and sentenced to life in prison. During Xi’s first term, he punished five other senior politicians for plotting to seize power under the spur of “burning personal ambition.”²⁹

Can Personalistic Rule Endure?

The flagrant failures of collective leadership under Hu help us to understand why Xi was able to convince (or intimidate) other members of the CCP elite to go along with his return to strongman leadership. The post-Mao institutionalization of leadership politics had not proceeded far or deeply enough to prevent a leader as ambitious as Xi from restoring personalistic dictatorial rule. Certain norms and precedents were followed, but this minimal institutionalization failed to stop Xi from grasping power.

Most authoritarian governments are brought down not by mass re-

volt, but by internal leadership splits. According to political scientist Milan Svolik, two-thirds of the world's authoritarian rulers deposed between 1946 and 2008 fell to elite insiders. He wrote positively of the stability achieved by institutionalized power-sharing in post-Mao China, but questioned whether it would be able to bind Xi Jinping as it did his predecessors.³⁰

Redistributing the spoils of power, as Xi is doing, generally leads to elite conflict. His power play could spark resistance from disappointed politicians who have lost their patronage and chances for promotion. The reaction could reach critical mass during Xi's second term when Xi's ambition to cling to power is out in the open. Chinese politicians value term limits and retirement rules as protection for their security against a leader who otherwise could ruin their careers at any time. Although the odds of success for an elite rebellion may be low, the more autocratically a leader behaves, the more likely other politicians are to try to bring him down. As Svolik observed, "The ladder to ultimate power becomes more slippery as the dictator advances to the top."³¹ Today no one dares to talk publicly about Deng's warnings against "overconcentration of power." But Deng's admonition provides a focal point for future elite resistance. The pendulum could swing back to institutionalized collective leadership, this time reinforced by a stronger legislature and legal system.

The more repressive Xi's regime becomes, however, the more reluctant he will be to leave the throne. He has made too many enemies. Xi's cult of personality could also snap back against him. The political elite was ready to embrace a stronger leader, but not one who aspires to make himself an object of worship in the style of Mao Zedong or Kim Jong Un. Even if no one dares to challenge Xi, he will continue to suspect everyone because he has no way of knowing who is loyal and who is faking.

Although an elite backlash against Xi could destabilize the system, an even greater risk to China, and to the world, is the poor decision making that may result from the excessive concentration of power in Beijing. Xi is unfettered domestically; he has grasped all the levers of power and surrounded himself with sycophants. Local officials who drag their feet in implementing policy must now face the Discipline Commission. Xi's signature projects, including the set of hugely ambitious infrastructure projects known as the Belt and Road Initiative, are going forward in the style of Mao-era ideological campaigns—officials vie to show loyalty by pressing eagerly ahead with whatever scheme the leader happens to favor.

In the world arena, meanwhile, the constraints on Xi are weakening amid declining U.S. credibility and influence. Xi's ambition for global leadership and his explicit ideological and mercantilist challenge to market democracies are forms of overreaching that could lead to a new Cold War. What is more, arbitrary and imprudent decisions taken during a crisis involving the East or South China Seas, the Korean Peninsula, or Taiwan could escalate into a hot war. The risks posed by Xi's over-

concentrated power are not confined within China's borders, but extend to the world beyond.

NOTES

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