

Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Hearing on “CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress”
Panel I: Elite Politics in China and the 20th Party Congress

Neil Thomas
China Analyst, Eurasia Group

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Introduction

The starting point for any analysis of the Chinese leadership should be to recognize how much we do not really know.¹ We do not really know how most decisions are made. We do not really know how factions operate or affect decision-making. And we do not know when or how Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), will leave office, or what will happen after he does so. The CCP exercises tight control over the Chinese information ecosystem, including what is said by and written about its leaders, which means that we have vanishingly thin access to the Party's internal political negotiations and policy discussions. This opacity means that outside observers of Chinese politics often miss signals, misinterpret directives, project unwarranted confidence, or fill factual voids with ungrounded speculation.

So, how should we analyze China's elite politics?² While it is hard to know what happens inside the "black box" of Beijing policymaking—especially at present, with expanding formal and informal restrictions on access to official archives and interview subjects—we know most of the inputs and the outputs. We know the institutional structure of the Chinese political system, as well as its levels of authority and lines of reporting. We know the individuals who hold or are purged from leadership positions in this system, as well as their family, education, and career backgrounds. We can consult data made available by government agencies, academics and researchers, and the Chinese internet. And, most important, we can read the policy documents and official media that the Party center publishes to transmit authoritative messages to around two million leading cadres, tens of millions of public employees, and over 95 million CCP members.³ These sources all require interpretation, and other productive research methods exist, but solid work is grounded in these fundamentals. I do not pretend to know Xi's mind;⁴ rather, I endeavor to use the facts available to offer informed estimations.

¹ See: Jessica Batke and Oliver Melton, '[Why Do We Keep Writing About Chinese Politics As if We Know More Than We Do?](#)' *ChinaFile*, 16 October 2017.

² See: Ryan Manuel, *[Strong State, Weak System: Social Health Insurance in Rural China, 1956-2007](#)*, DPhil Dissertation, University of Oxford, 2016, Ch. 3; Daniel Tobin, '[How Xi Jinping's "New Era" Should Have Ended U.S. Debate on Beijing's Ambitions](#),' Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on 'A "China Model?" Beijing's Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and Standards,' 13 March 2020.

³ Hon S. Chan and Jie Gao, '[The Politics of Personnel Redundancy: The Non-Leading Cadre System in the Chinese Bureaucracy](#),' *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 235, 2018, pp. 622-643; Yuen Yuen Ang, '[Counting Cadres: A Comparative View of the Size of China's Public Employment](#),' *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 211, 2012, pp. 676-696; CCP Organization Department, [中国共产党党内统计公报](#), 30 June 2021.

⁴ Though official sources can give us more of an idea: François Bougon, *[Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping](#)*, Hurst, 2018.

1. How completely does Xi dominate decision-making processes and the political system more generally? What kind of opposition does he face to his personal leadership and/or over any particular policy areas of importance, and how meaningful is this opposition?⁵

Xi dominates the Chinese political system. Since becoming General Secretary in November 2012, Xi has gained a level of power that exceeds his predecessors Hu Jintao (2002-2012) and Jiang Zemin (1989-2002) and evokes the supreme authority of former paramount leaders Deng Xiaoping (~1978-1994) and Mao Zedong (1949-1976). He launched a sweeping anti-corruption campaign that addressed legitimate governance issues but was also a tool to cripple rival power centers such as the Hu-affiliated Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) and the “Shanghai Gang” of Jiang acolytes. He seized control of policy by concentrating decision-making power in several new Party bodies that he leads, most notably the CCP Central Comprehensively Deepening Reforms Commission (CCDR). He remade the CCP in his own image through a propaganda offensive that fêted his individual leadership, extensive ideological campaigns to force fealty within the Party, and reclaiming the “core leader” title last held by Jiang (but bestowed on him by Deng). He stamped his mark on the armed forces and security services by purging scores of top officials and orchestrating a radical reorganization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). At the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, he established his position as on par with that of Mao and Deng by inserting his personal creed of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” into the CCP Constitution.⁶ He also defied norms by not anointing a successor and by fast-tracking the promotion of many political allies to secure control of the CCP’s elite 25-member Politburo and its top 7-member Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). Then, in March 2018, the National People’s Congress (NPC), China’s legislature, abolished presidential term limits, allowing Xi to rule for life as Party leader (CCP General Secretary), military commander (Chairman of the CCP Central Military Commission), and head of state (President of the People Republic of China).

Xi made many enemies, but he seems to have crushed both elite and popular resistance, and now faces little meaningful opposition to his personal leadership. Xi’s bold power grab, brutal control of political expression, re-embrace of economic statism, and aggressive foreign policy generated a degree of “backlash” from policy elites and the public.⁷ Potentially formidable groups such as factional rivals, moderate technocrats, wealthy executives, and political liberals all count among the “losers” of Xi’s rule.⁸ High-profile dissidents and disillusioned insiders claim that opposition to Xi’s rule is significant and growing.⁹ Unfortunately for these voices of

⁵ This testimony draws on earlier work, especially: Neil Thomas, [‘Ties That Bind: Xi’s People on the Politburo,’](#) MacroPolo, 17 June 2020; Neil Thomas, [‘China Politics 2025: Stronger as Xi Goes,’](#) MacroPolo, 26 October 2020; Neil Thomas and Michael Hirson, [‘Xi Set to Secure Third Term, Brining Progress on Domestic Agenda and Continued Foreign Tensions,’](#) Eurasia Group, 2 June 2021; Neil Thomas and Michael Hirson, [‘History Resolution Signals Xi’s Resolve Advance His Economic and Political Agenda,’](#) Eurasia Group, 19 November 2021.

⁶ 中国共产党党章; Xi Jinping, [决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告](#), 18 October 2017.

⁷ E.g., Xu Zhangrun (trans. Geremie R. Barmé), [‘Xi’s China, the Handiwork of an Autocratic Roué,’](#) *The New York Review of Books*, 9 August 2021; Geremie R. Barmé, [‘Xu Zhangrun Archive,’](#) *China Heritage*.

⁸ See: Richard McGregor, [Xi Jinping: The Backlash](#), Penguin, 2019.

⁹ E.g., Cai Xia, [‘The Party That Failed: An Insider Breaks With Beijing,’](#) *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2021.

conscience, there is little to no evidence of hostility toward Xi in the ~370-member Central Committee that forms the main “selectorate” of CCP politics.¹⁰ Xi’s grasp on the levers of power neutralized any opponents, and he has been ruthless in imprisoning people he sees as threats, from Party insiders to ordinary citizens. Prospective challengers face steep obstacles, including the collective action problem of coordinating a political move against Xi without detection or betrayal.¹¹ Additionally, Xi’s blend of domestic populism and foreign assertiveness appears to enjoy some grassroots appeal, and his ideological control makes him virtually synonymous with Party rule, factors that raise the public cost for elites to move against him. Moreover, purges of central CCP cadres (the few thousand leaders at the deputy ministerial level and above) and senior PLA officers (at the deputy army level and above) are down by over two-thirds since 2015, implying that Xi feels more secure in his political standing (see Chart 1 in Appendix).

While Xi sets overall priorities and can intervene decisively on any issue, much substantive decision-making occurs at lower levels, and other leaders have influence in specific policy areas. In China’s unitary Leninist Party-State, the central CCP institutions led by Xi make all major policy decisions, which are then implemented down a hierarchy of sub-national Party-led governments at the provincial, prefectural, county, township, and village levels.¹² In practice, central policies set broad directions and overarching goals, which lower-level authorities implement through local regulations of increasing specificity further down the hierarchy. This system requires local officials to decide how best to achieve the center’s goals in their jurisdiction, which gives cadres some scope to interpret, distort, or even circumvent central policies to suit parochial political or economic interests.¹³ Xi’s centralization of power and enhanced oversight of policy implementation has reassembled some pieces of this “fragmented authoritarianism,” but his crusades against “formalism” (shallow implementation) and “bureaucratism” (inefficient implementation) remain ongoing.¹⁴ Back in Beijing, officials and experts exercise some influence through policy advice, especially in technocratic areas such as economics, energy, and innovation. For example, reports suggest Xi limited the scope and now may delay the rollout of a property tax trial due to internal pushback about the likely economic costs.¹⁵ And we know that Xi at least consults with other PBSC and Politburo members.¹⁶

¹⁰ See: Susan L. Shirk, [The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China](#), University of California Press, 1993.

¹¹ See, e.g.: Jude Blanchette, [Testimony Prepared for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission](#), Hearing on “What Keeps Xi Up at Night: Beijing’s Internal and External Challenges,” 7 February 2019.

¹² See: Susan V. Lawrence and Mari Y. Lee, [China’s Political System in Charts: A Snapshot Before the 20th Party Congress](#), Congressional Research Service, 24 November 2021.

¹³ See: Andrew Mertha, [“Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0”: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process](#), *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 200, 2009, pp. 995-1012.

¹⁴ See: Minxin Pei, [Bureaucratic Strategies of Coping with Strongman Rule: How Local Officials Survive in President Xi Jinping’s New Order](#), *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 September 2019; Chun Han Wong, [Xi Jinping’s Eager-to-Please Bureaucrats Snarl His China Plans](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 March 2021.

¹⁵ Lingling Wei, [In Tackling China’s Real-Estate Bubble, Xi Jinping Faces Resistance to Property-Tax Plan](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 October 2021; John Liu, Lin Zhu and Jing Zhao, [China Property Tax Trial Likely Delayed During Real Estate Slump](#), *Bloomberg News*, 5 January 2022.

¹⁶ Bob Davis and Lingling Wei, [Superpower Showdown: How the Battle Between Trump and Xi Threatens a New Cold War](#), Harper Business, 2020.

However, Xi's position appears as strong as ever heading into the 20th Party Congress. In November, the Sixth Plenum of the Central Committee passed the Party's third-ever "history resolution," a landmark document that effectively embedded Xi's personal leadership and policy agenda into the party's official worldview.¹⁷ This authoritative text introduced a new doctrine of the "two establishments" (两个确立) that declares the CCP "has established Comrade Xi Jinping's core position on the Party's Central Committee and in the Party as a whole, and has established the guiding position of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." This new "formulation" (提法) is notable because it indicates that the economic headwinds and international opposition generated by Xi's policies have not diminished his ability to dominate elite politics. Furthermore, Xi's prominence in Chinese newspapers and journals, which roughly corresponds to a leader's political standing in China's censored and propaganda-infused public sphere, has continued to increase relative to other senior leaders (see Chart 2 in Appendix). Xi's strong position provides further impetus to his assertive "wolf warrior" diplomacy and to long-term progress on key domestic priorities such as "common prosperity" and financial de-risking. In short, the Sixth Plenum was a political triumph for Xi that could empower him to rule for many more years, if not decades. Party leaders simply do not get to write their own history resolution if they face meaningful opposition: Mao and Deng masterminded the Party's previous history resolutions to *begin* eras of political domination.¹⁸

2. Some observers have assessed that Xi Jinping has reversed a trend toward institutionalization and consensus decision-making. To what extent is that the case, and is it attributable solely to Xi? What are the most important changes Xi has made to the organizational structure of the Party and the government?

The most important changes that Xi has made to the organizational structure of the Chinese system are to centralize power: from the state to the Party, from local Party bodies to the Party center, and from the collective Party leadership to the individual Party leader. Xi ended any notion of "Party-state separation" by integrating a raft of state functions into CCP agencies, establishing the CCDRC and several new CCP commissions to strengthen his policy leadership in the economy and finance—sidelining Premier Li Keqiang and his State Council (China's Cabinet) from their traditional roles in these areas—and in other key areas including national security, cyberspace, foreign policy, military-civil fusion, and legislation.¹⁹ Xi heightened central scrutiny of local cadres and public servants by transforming his anti-corruption campaign into a "forever journey" of "self-revolution" that uses inspections, investigations, and technology to enforce political loyalty, improve policy implementation, and implement organizational reforms.²⁰ Xi has progressively elevated his personal standing in the CCP leadership, from becoming "core leader" in 2016, to propagating the "two establishments" last year, and by permeating Party

¹⁷ CCP Central Committee, [中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议](#), 11 November 2021.

¹⁸ See: Xi Jinping, [关于《中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议》的说明](#), 17 November 2021.

¹⁹ See: Nis Grünberg and Katja Drinhausen, ['The Party Leads on Everything: China's Changing Governance in Xi Jinping's New Era.'](#) Mercator Institute for China Studies, 24 September 2019.

²⁰ See: Christopher Carothers, ['Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign: An All-Purpose Governing Tool.'](#) *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 March 2021; CCP Central Committee, [习近平在省部级主要领导干部学习贯彻党的十九届六中全会精神专题研讨班开班式上发表重要讲话](#), 11 January 2022.

discourse since 2018 with the “two safeguards” doctrine to “resolutely safeguard General Secretary Xi Jinping’s status as the core of the Party’s Central Committee and the core of the whole Party, and to resolutely safeguard the authority and centralized and unified leadership of the Party’s Central Committee.”²¹ This centralization both enables Xi to get more done in the short-term and exacerbates policy risks in the longer-term (see Section 3).

Xi has therefore reversed a trend toward consensus decision-making in the Party leadership, but many elites may have supported this turnaround. However, this trend was as much a function of factional power shifts as a deliberate effort to institutionalize Party decision-making.²² Hu Jintao’s two terms as General Secretary, from 2002-2012, saw the peak of “collective leadership” in the PBSC, with Hu’s role being more “first among equals” than “paramount leader.” Hu led a PBSC with nine members, many of whom were allies of powerful ex-leader Jiang Zemin, each of whom controlled a different policy vertical, and all of whom often had to sign off on major decisions.²³ Hu’s associated weakness produced a so-called “lost decade” of rampant corruption, factional conflict, stalled reform, and public cynicism, which culminated in the takedown of rogue leadership contender Bo Xilai in a murder and corruption scandal.²⁴ Xi’s history resolution criticized “previously lax and weak governance” that “posed a significant test to the party’s governance of the country” as vested interests stymied the Party’s ability to counter systemic threats—political, economic, social, and environmental. This crisis likely gave Xi an elite mandate to restore the Party’s authority, which he used to consolidate power.²⁵

However, for Xi, political power also has a policy purpose. Xi is not a simple megalomaniac. His personalist rule is an effort to “concentrate power to do big things.”²⁶ He wants to achieve the CCP’s “second centenary goal” to make China a “great modern socialist country” that is “rich, powerful, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and modern” by the 100th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China in 2049.²⁷ But he believes this ambition requires the Party to “comprehensively deepen reforms” and “modernize China’s system and capacity for governance.”²⁸ That’s because the political system has to shift its focus from simply pursuing rapid growth to pursuing high-quality growth. Xi took the arcane but incredibly significant step in 2017 to change the Party’s definition of the “principal contradiction” (主要矛盾) in Chinese society, from that between “the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social production” to that between “unbalanced and inadequate development and

²¹ CCP Politburo, [中共中央政治局召开会议 审议《中国共产党支部工作条例（试行）》和《2018—2022年全国干部教育培训规划》](#), 22 September 2018; CCP Central Committee, [中共中央关于加强党的政治建设的意见](#), 31 January 2019.

²² See: Joseph Torigian, [‘The Shadow of Deng Xiaoping on Chinese Elite Politics,’](#) *War On The Rocks*, 30 January 2017; Ling Li, [‘Xi Jinping’s Succession: What Did the West Get Wrong?’](#), *Made in China Journal*, 23 May 2019.

²³ E.g., Susan L. Shirk, [‘China in Xi’s “New Era”: The Return to Personalistic Rule,’](#) *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, April 2018, pp. 22-36.

²⁴ See, e.g.: Geremie R. Barmé, [‘The Ten Grave Problems Facing China,’](#) *The China Story*, 8 September 2012.

²⁵ See, e.g., James Palmer, [‘The Resistible Rise of Xi Jinping,’](#) *Foreign Policy*, 19 October 2017.

²⁶ E.g., Xi Jinping, [在科学家座谈会上的讲话](#), 11 September 2020.

²⁷ Xi Jinping, [决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告](#), 18 October 2017.

²⁸ Neil Thomas, [‘Party All The Time: Xi Jinping’s Governance Reform Agenda After the Fourth Plenum,’](#) *MacroPolo*, 14 November 2019

the people's ever-growing needs for a better life."²⁹ Put simply, the Party must do more to ensure it can continue to deliver improved living standards to Chinese people in an age of slowing growth and rising expectations.³⁰ Xi is concerned because he believes a key reason for the Soviet collapse was that "the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was divorced from the people and became a privileged bureaucratic clique that only defended its own interests."³¹ Hence ambitious programs like "common prosperity" to reduce inequality and the "new development concept" for balanced and sustainable growth. But these policies demand painful and difficult redistributions of resources across regions, among income groups, and between a range of powerful sectors such as finance, property, and technology. That's why Xi believes that China needs more "top-level design" (顶层设计), to overcome the vested interests and bureaucratic resistance that could impede the implementation of his agenda. In the long-term, he believes the Party's future—and likely his own leadership—depend on it.

*Xi has strengthened the institutionalization of CCP rule through a concerted effort to improve "law-based governance."*³² Xi's personal power may approach that of Mao, but he governs in a very different style to the former Chairman. Where Mao urged Red Guards to create "great chaos in heaven," Xi is obsessed with bureaucratic control and political process. Xi may reverse the "institutionalization" of the top leadership succession (which only happened smoothly once, in 2012; see Sections 6 and 7), but he has made unprecedented efforts to institutionalize his own power. Last year alone he passed new CCP rules to strengthen central supervision of leading cadres, increase central control over personnel selection, tighten limits on public expression by party members, and elevate the General Secretary's control over the agenda, convening, and operation of the Central Committee, Politburo, and PBSC.³³ Indeed, Xi has now formulated or amended 70% of operational central Party regulations (see Chart 3 in Appendix). When it comes to policymaking, Xi has highlighted a focus on "law-based governance" (依法治国) to advance his policy agenda and improve execution. While the Party remains above the law, this concept emphasizes the greater use of laws and regulations to delimit the powers of officials, citizens, and firms throughout the country and establish more clear, consistent, and enforceable procedures for governing in all spheres. Under Xi's rule, the NPC has passed a record number of laws, hitting an all-time high in 2021 (see Chart 4 in Appendix), and the legislature has gained significant supervision powers over state economic policymaking.³⁴ Law-based governance can be understood as an effort to strengthen "rule of law" in areas that do not challenge CCP rule; the goal is to use laws to improve the Party's governance of China.

²⁹ See: Xu Lingui, '[Xinhua Insight: China Embraces New "Principal Contradiction" When Embarking on New Journey](#),' *China Today*, 21 October 2017.

³⁰ Bruce J. Dickson, *The Party and the People: Chinese Politics in the 21st Century*, Princeton University Press, 2021.

³¹ Xi Jinping, [把握新发展阶段，贯彻新发展理念，构建新发展格局](#), 11 January 2021.

³² Neil Thomas et al, '[Legislative Agenda Mixed for Reforms But NPC Emerging as Bigger Player](#),' Eurasia Group, 13 April 2021.

³³ Neil Thomas and Michael Hirson, '[Xi's Rewrite of Party Rules Consolidates Authority but Reduces Flexibility and Increases Policy Risk](#),' Eurasia Group, 30 June 2021; Holly Snape, '[Watching the Number Ones: The Centre's "Opinion" on Overseeing the Party's Powerful](#),' *Sinocism*, 13 July 2021; Holly Snape, '[Regulations on the Rights of Party Members: New-Era Obligations in the Name of Rights](#),' *Sinocism*, 20 January 2021; Minxin Pei, '[Rewriting the Rules of the Chinese Party-State: Xi's Progress in Reinvigorating the CCP](#),' *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 June 2019.

³⁴ E.g., NPC Standing Committee, [全国人民代表大会常务委员会关于加强经济工作监督的决定](#), 24 December 2021.

3. To what extent has Xi Jinping been successful in mobilizing the Party and government to accomplish his political goals, such as increasing responsiveness to the Party center and bolstering the Party's legitimacy?

Xi has seen some success in mobilizing the Chinese system to achieve policy goals that are short-term, well-defined, and easily measurable. Xi is increasingly leaning into political discipline to increase responsiveness to the Party center, with the annual number of internal investigations and punishments more than tripling since Xi's first full year in power (see Chart 5 in Appendix). Record levels of internal monitoring, evaluation, and control may strengthen Xi's ability to correct lower-level noncompliance, improve policy execution, and deliver public services. Perhaps Xi's greatest success on policy responsiveness is his national implementation of a "Zero Covid" strategy. A somewhat broader yardstick of Xi's performance is progress on the "three decisive battles" (三大攻坚战) that he prioritized in 2017: "to forestall and defuse major [financial] risks, carry out targeted poverty alleviation, and prevent and control pollution."³⁵ While Beijing hailed "decisive success" in March 2021, data show more mixed outcomes.³⁶ On pollution, strict environmental policies achieved tangible reductions that clearly improved people's lives (see Chart 6 in Appendix). On poverty, Beijing won this battle, but only in the narrow sense of eradicating extreme poverty in rural areas and only with massive outlays of money and time (see Chart 7 in Appendix). On financial risks, a concerted effort to reduce leverage may have slowed credit expansion, but the debt-to-GDP proportion still rose significantly (see Chart 8 in Appendix). The more complex the issue, the harder for Xi.

*Xi has struggled to navigate the implementation of structural reforms that address long-term systemic issues.*³⁷ Xi's history resolution declared that, under his leadership, the CCP had "solved many difficult problems that we had wanted to solve for a long time but had never solved," and it does appear that Xi has made Beijing more capable overall. World Bank measures of government effectiveness, regulatory quality, control of corruption, and even rule of law all hit new highs for China last year (see Chart 9 in Appendix). However, Xi's top-down "campaign"-style governance appears less suited to resolving structural challenges that require careful calibration between state and market and between central and local governments.³⁸ These issues include slowing growth, sluggish productivity, declining demography, chronic debt, and lagging innovation. Failure to address these problems could increasingly weigh on China's economic and political outlook. Furthermore, Xi's centralized rule

³⁵ Xi Jinping, [决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告](#), 18 October 2017.

³⁶ Li Keqiang, [政府工作报告](#), 5 March 2021; Zhu Jun et al, [三大攻坚战取得决定性成就](#), 1 March 2021.

³⁷ See also: Daniel H. Rosen, '[China's Economic Reckoning: The Price of Failed Reforms](#),' *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2021; Jude Blanchette, '[Xi's Gamble, The Race to Consolidate Power and Stave Off Disaster](#),' *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2021.

³⁸ See, e.g.: Chris Buckley, '["Drive the Blade In": Xi Shakes Up China's Law-and-Order Forces](#),' *The New York Times*, 20 August 2020; Kristen Looney, '[The Blunt Force of China's Mobilisation Campaigns](#),' *The Financial Times*, 26 January 2021; Josh Chin, '[Xi Jinping's Leadership Style: Micromanagement That Leaves Underlings Scrambling](#),' *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 December 2021.

creates its own political risks that may weigh on long-term policy performance.³⁹ It distorts resource allocation by encouraging money to follow political rather than market signals, as shown by overinvestment and excess capacity in priority sectors like semiconductors and electric vehicles. It can reduce flexibility in local governance as cadres are increasingly bound by central dictates, as suggested by a 34% drop in mentions of policy pilots in Party discourse from 2015 to 2020 (see Chart 10 in Appendix). It risks policy overshooting as fear of punishment and competition for favor push local officials to overzealously implement central policies, such as Covid-19 lockdowns. It places a rising burden on top leaders to make correct decisions lest their errors permeate the system and cause crises, as may result from Xi's "wolf warrior" diplomacy and growing opposition to Beijing in Western capitals. Xi has shown some awareness of the need for flexibility, such as by slowing the pace of "common prosperity" policies following market blowback and by saying cadres should not be punished for "unintentional errors made to promote development."⁴⁰ But Xi also knows that the road ahead will be tough. That's why he urges cadres to develop a "crisis consciousness" (忧患意识) and make national security the dominant paradigm of policymaking. Ultimately, Xi is girding the CCP for an extended period of "struggle" wherein some level of growth and good relations with the West are sacrificed to implement structural changes to the economy and realize nationalist foreign policy goals.⁴¹

Xi's policy performance, populist policies, and patriotic posturing appear to have helped bolster the Party's popular legitimacy, although we should be cautious about assessing Chinese public opinion. Evidence shows that an increasing number of political elites express approval for Xi's policies, likely due to a combination of genuine support and greater coercion (see Chart 11 in Appendix).⁴² But Beijing's censorship, propaganda, and repression mean that opinion polling of Chinese public opinion is uncommon. What polls we do have consistently record high levels of support for the Chinese government, a finding that is at least partly attributable to approval bias in authoritarian countries, but which is also plausibly connected to the rapid rise in both China's material living standards and international standing under CCP rule.⁴³ Beijing also encourages Chinese netizens to provide feedback and make requests to local governments, which helps to improve governance and public opinion management.⁴⁴ Most meaningful, however, is data that reveal government approval ratings have improved over time, including during Xi's leadership and the Covid-19 pandemic. One study found that the proportion of Chinese people satisfied with the outcome of interactions with local officials had more than doubled since the early Hu Jintao era and had risen by over half since the end of Hu's tenure, from 31.7% in 2004 to 47.9% in 2011 to 75.1% in 2016. The study logged similar increases in

³⁹ Neil Thomas and Michael Hirson, '[Xi's Rewrite of Party Rules Consolidates Authority but Reduces Flexibility and Increases Policy Risk](#),' Eurasia Group, 30 June 2021.

⁴⁰ CCP General Office, 中共中央办公厅印发《关于进一步激励广大干部新时代新担当新作为的意见》, 20 May 2018.

⁴¹ Xinhua News Agency, 习近平在中央党校（国家行政学院）中青年干部培训班开班式上发表重要讲话强调 信念坚定对党忠诚实事求是担当作为 努力成为可堪大用能担重任的栋梁之才, 1 September 2021.

⁴² Neil Thomas, '[Xi Jinping is Gaining Support from Party Elites, the Numbers Say](#),' *SupChina*, 4 March 2021.

⁴³ See: Wenfang Tang, '[The "Surprise" of Authoritarian Resilience in China](#),' *American Affairs*, Spring 2018; Neil Thomas, '[These Numbers Show Why U.S. Policy Makers are Misjudging Popular Support for China's Government](#),' *MarketWatch*, 2 October 2019; Chang Che, '[Do Chinese People Support Their Government? Here's Why It's Hard to Tell](#),' *SupChina*, 25 August 2020.

⁴⁴ Neil Thomas, '[How Beijing Embraces Public Opinion to Govern and Control](#),' *MacroPolo*, 7 May 2019.

perceptions that local officials were “receptive to public opinion,” “serve the interests of the locality,” and “tax and collect fees according to the law” (see Chart 12 in Appendix).⁴⁵ Another study found that urban Chinese citizens’ average level of trust in the central government, as scored out of ten, rose from 8.23 in June 2019 to 8.87 in May 2020, with the proportion saying they “preferred living under China’s political system as compared to others” rising from 70% to 83% over the same period.⁴⁶ Of course, such data is scarce, and carries a risk of bias, and anecdotal reports and social media posts suggest rising dissatisfaction with Xi’s policies, especially around Covid-19 lockdowns. But the consistent findings of public opinion research imply that we should not discount the possibility that many Chinese citizens support Xi’s rule. If Xi struggles to manage China’s economic future, polling will be important data to watch.

4. What are Xi’s intentions for the forthcoming Party Congress? Where does he want governance (including over economic, foreign, and military policy) to go after the Party Congress?

Xi intends to use the Party Congress to consolidate control. The 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party will likely convene in either October or November. Held every five years, a “Party Congress” brings thousands of CCP delegates to Beijing for a week of meetings to hear work reports from the Central Committee and the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), deliberate and decide on major issues facing the CCP, discuss and pass amendments to the CCP Constitution, and select the next Central Committee and CCDI.⁴⁷

Xi will likely further entrench his policy agenda in his Party Congress Report. On the opening day of the Party Congress, Xi will deliver a “Report” (报告) on behalf of the 19th Central Committee that evaluates its work over past five years and outlines political priorities and policy objectives for the 20th Central Committee. This report is an authoritative document that provides a high-level blueprint for CCP policymaking over (at least) the next five years. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi used his Report to establish a “new era” in which the Chinese nation would “become strong,” in which “the Party leads everything,” and in which the Party now aims to “basically realize socialist modernization” by 2035 and complete its rise as a “socialist modern great power” by the middle of the century.⁴⁸ This year, Xi is likely to deliver a rosy assessment of his policy achievements over the last five years—such as realizing the CCP’s “first centenary goal” to achieve a “moderately prosperous society” by doubling 2010 per capita GDP by 2020—and double-down on economic restructuring and foreign assertiveness (see Section 5).

Xi will likely raise his profile in the CCP Constitution. The CCP Constitution (党章) is the most authoritative document that governs the Party’s internal operations. The Party Congress is the

⁴⁵ Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich and Jessie Turiel, [Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time](#), Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard University, 2020.

⁴⁶ Lei Guang et al, [‘Pandemic Sees Increase in Chinese Support for Regime, Decrease in Views Towards the U.S.’](#), China Data Lab, UC San Diego, 30 June 2020.

⁴⁷ [中国共产党党章](#).

⁴⁸ Xi Jinping, [决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告](#), 18 October 2017.

only CCP body empowered to amend the Constitution and has done so every time that it has convened, usually to incorporate new theories and policies associated with current or former leaders. In 2017, the 19th Party Congress amended the constitution to enshrine “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” as a “guide to action,” consecrate Xi’s status as the “core” of the Party’s Central Committee and embed major Xi policies like the Belt and Road Initiative. This year’s Party Congress is likely to amend the CCP Constitution again, to entrench new Xi policies and ideological formulations, such as the “two establishments” introduced in the third history resolution. There’s also a chance that it will put Xi’s signature ideology on par with that of Mao by shortening it to simply “Xi Jinping Thought.”⁴⁹

Xi will likely stack the new 20th Central Committee with political allies. The Central Committee is formally the highest organ of CCP power when the Party Congress is not in session. According to the CCP Constitution, “Only the Party’s Central Committee has the power to make decisions about major national policy issues.” At recent Party Congresses, the number of candidates has exceeded the number of seats available on the Central Committee, although the list of candidates is drawn up by top CCP leaders after extensive consultations and negotiations.⁵⁰ In 2017, to select the 19th Central Committee, delegates at the 19th Party Congress chose 204 full members from 222 candidates and 172 non-voting alternate members from 189 candidates.⁵¹ Of these 204 full members, only 78 had been full members of the 18th Central Committee, producing a turnover rate for fresh members and promoted alternates of 64%, well above the average of 54% across the previous four Central Committees.⁵² This turnover—members who are not on the Politburo are normally not reappointed once they reach 63—provided Xi with added scope to shape the Party elite, and a similarly high turnover is expected this year.⁵³ Indeed, a key plank of Xi’s power has been his extraordinary ability to elevate personal associates and political loyalists into leadership positions, who can then support Xi’s rule and policies.⁵⁴ He has promoted an unusual number of leaders who worked with him in Zhejiang (“New Zhijiang Army”), Shanghai (“New Shanghai Gang”), and Fujian, plus some important allies with ties to his ancestral home of Shaanxi (“Shaanxi Gang”) and his alma mater Tsinghua University (“Tsinghua Clique”).⁵⁵ Xi has also shown an inclination to promote cadres with

⁴⁹ See: Bill Bishop, [Sinocism China Newsletter](#); David Bandurski, [‘New Xi Jinping Diplomatic Thought Center Opens,’](#) China Media Project, 21 July 2020.

⁵⁰ Zhou Na, [‘The 19th Central Committee for Xi Jinping’s “New Era”: Breaking Conventional Party Rules?’](#) *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2020, pp. 76-94.

⁵¹ Xinhua News Agency, [‘领航新时代的坚强领导集体——党的新一届中央领导机构产生纪实,’](#) 26 October 2017.

⁵² Joseph Fewsmith, [Rethinking Chinese Politics](#), Cambridge University Press, 2021; Cheng Li, [Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership](#), Brookings Institution Press, 2016.

⁵³ Damien Ma and Joshua Henderson, [‘Age Rules: The Arrival of the Post-60s Generation in Chinese Politics,’](#) MacroPolo, 31 December 2021.

⁵⁴ On the importance of factions in Chinese elite politics: Victor Shih, Christopher Adolph and Mingxing Liu, [‘Getting Ahead in the Communist Party: Explaining the Advancement of Central Committee Members in China,’](#) *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 1, 2012, pp. 166-187; David Meyer, Victor C. Shih and Jonghyuk Lee, [‘Factions of Different Stripes: Gauging the Recruitment Logics of Factions in the Reform Period,’](#) *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 16, Issue 1, 2016, pp. 43-60; c.f., Pierre F. Landry, Xiaobo Lü and Haiyan Duan, [‘Does Performance Matter? Evaluating Political Selection Along the Chinese Administrative Ladder,’](#) *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 51, Issue 8, 2018, pp. 1074-1105.

⁵⁵ See: Section 7; Cheng Li, [‘Xi Jinping’s Inner Circle \(Parts 1-5\),’](#) *China Leadership Monitor*, 2014-2015.

previous work ties to his key allies on the Politburo. Proximity to Xi now appears to offer more explanatory power for personnel promotions than previous models of factional competition.⁵⁶ Where once Chinese elite politics was characterized as a power balance between rival factions, it is now better understood as being led by a “dominant faction” under Xi.⁵⁷

The Central Committee is key because it selects higher bodies. Right after the Party Congress, the 20th Central Committee will convene its first plenary meeting (or “plenum”) to select a new Politburo, PBSC, and General Secretary, to select a new Central Military Commission, and to approve the new CCDI’s selection of its Standing Committee, Deputy Secretaries, and Secretary. While top appointments are decided in advance by an opaque process of negotiation and bargaining, the Central Committee functions as a “selectorate” of political elites who top leaders like Xi must control to secure power and approve policy. In 2007 and 2012, at the 17th and 18th Party Congresses, the Hu Jintao administration held straw polls for Central Committee members to express their opinion on Politburo candidates. The results were secret and non-binding but reportedly did influence leadership appointments, including Xi’s own victory over Li Keqiang to be anointed Hu’s successor in 2007.⁵⁸ However, in 2017, Xi tightened his grip by banning straw polls and replacing them with face-to-face consultations. Xi talked with 57 current and former senior officials, PBSC members interviewed 258 ministerial-level officials, and the Central Military Commission questioned 32 military cadres.⁵⁹ This more controlled process was likely one factor that helped Xi to increase the proportion of his associates from 20% on the 18th Politburo (2012-2017) to 60% on the 19th Politburo (2017-2022).⁶⁰ Xi is likely to add yet more allies to the 20th Politburo and PBSC, which in turn will make it easier for him to retain power and execute his priorities. Following the Sixth Plenum last November, the CCP began the process of selecting the ~2,300 delegates to the 20th Party Congress, with Party media emphasizing they must “firmly uphold General Secretary Xi Jinping’s core position in both the Party’s Central Committee and the Party as a whole.”⁶¹

Xi will likely consolidate more powers in Party organizations after the Party Congress. Like the CCP Central Committee, every five years there is turnover in the membership and leadership of the State Council, National People’s Congress (NPC), and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The change occurs at the annual meetings of the NPC and CPPCC National Committee in the March following a Party Congress (these meetings overlap and are together known as the “two meetings” [两会]). At that time, the CCP implements a twice-a-decade “State Council institutional reform” that tweaks the organizational structure of government ministries and agencies. In March 2018, however, six months after the 19th Party Congress, the CCP

⁵⁶ See: Neil Thomas, ‘[Eye on 2022 \(Part 1\): Rising Stars in the Provinces](#),’ MacroPolo, 26 January 2021; Neil Thomas, ‘[Eye on 2022 \(Part 2\): Rising Stars in Beijing](#),’ MacroPolo, 16 February 2021.

⁵⁷ Eun Kyong Choi, John Wagner Givens and Andrew MacDonald, ‘[From Power Balance to Dominant Faction in Xi Jinping’s China](#),’ *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 248, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 935-956.

⁵⁸ Susan L. Shirk, ‘[China in Xi’s “New Era”: The Return to Personalistic Rule](#),’ *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, Issue 2, April 2018, pp. 22-36.

⁵⁹ Xinhua News Agency, ‘[领航新时代的坚强领导集体——党的新一届中央领导机构产生纪实](#),’ 26 October 2017.

⁶⁰ Neil Thomas, ‘[Ties That Bind: Xi’s People on the Politburo](#),’ MacroPolo, 17 June 2020.

⁶¹ Commentator, [高质量做好党的二十大代表选举工作](#), *People’s Daily*, 7 December 2021.

Central Committee published an unprecedented “Plan to Deepen Reform of Party and State Institutions.”⁶² The plan boosted Xi’s control by cutting the number of ministries, absorbing numerous state agencies and functions into the Party, and creating the National Supervisory Commission (NSC) super-agency to monitor corruption, policy implementation, and ideological conformity among public employees (whether CCP members or not). In March 2023, Xi is likely to pass another round of institutional reforms that further centralize decision-making in Party bodies, possibly in priority areas such as science and technology policy.

5. Are there any changes of policy direction likely in 2022-3 stemming from the Party Congress?

The Party Congress is likely to focus on continuity over change in Xi’s policy direction. A remarkable aspect of the third history resolution was its emphasis on continuity. Of Mao and Deng’s history resolutions, it said “their basic points and conclusions remain valid to this day” (the most notable departure was omitting Deng’s criticism of Mao’s “cult of personality”). It celebrated the contributions of all previous paramount leaders and celebrated Beijing’s post-Mao focus on advancing economic development through “reform and opening.” And the document appeared more an effort to entrench Xi’s existing agenda than to pursue radical new directions—it mostly recounted and affirmed policies Xi already has in place. While the Party Congress may bring new initiatives, it seems Xi is most set on advancing his current priorities.

That said, the very holding of a Party Congress can distort policymaking, as Xi will likely focus on domestic stability and risk control while he negotiates the turnover of senior officials. Power maneuvers in the run-up to previous Party Congresses produced significant political shocks. Hu Jintao arrested Bo Xilai the March before the 18th Party Congress of November 2012, presaging Xi’s anti-corruption campaign. Xi himself ousted rising political star Sun Zhengcai the July before the 19th Party Congress of October 2017, quieting potential opponents of his radical elevation. Yet, because Xi has now done much of the heavy lifting needed to secure his position, the political cycle of the 20th Party Congress is likely to see more of an emphasis on stability, with Xi cultivating a political environment that minimizes risks and visible pushback. Therefore, it is the easing of this focus after the Party Congress that could bring some significant policy shifts.

The CCP could put more weight on Xi’s “common prosperity” agenda and regulatory campaigns. The next few years will be a balancing act for Xi. He will have to weigh his regulatory agenda of reducing inequality, improving productivity, and escaping the middle-income trap with political imperatives to control Covid-19, maintain healthy growth, and project strength internationally. While Xi will want to avoid a major economic slowdown or foreign policy crisis, a successful Party Congress may provide backing to strengthen his “common prosperity” agenda to improve the equality of China’s income distribution while pursuing “high-quality” expansion in the overall economy. This would allow Xi to tolerate somewhat lower growth to press ahead with

⁶² CCP Central Committee, [中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》](#), 21 March 2018.

what he considers politically essential long-term structural reforms to regulate the tech sector, reduce systemic financial risk, and boost the human capital of the Chinese population.⁶³

The CCP could begin to relax its “dynamic zero” approach to Covid-19 after the Party Congress. Xi has centered China’s Covid-19 response on “putting the people and human life above all else.” It uses mass testing, snap lockdowns, and travel restrictions to extinguish local outbreaks and keep cases extremely low. He has invested significant political capital in this strategy, which propaganda hails as a paradigmatic example of the CCP’s good governance and of China’s superior political model to Western democracy. In China, every day “living with Covid” would mean hundreds of thousands of infections, and likely thousands of hospitalizations and deaths, putting huge strain on the country’s second-rate vaccines and underdeveloped health system.⁶⁴ It is thus unlikely that Xi will relax China’s “zero Covid” strategy before the Party Congress, as this could undermine social stability and weaken Xi’s position as he looks to promote allies and win a third term as leader. If Xi achieves his goals at the Party Congress, then the economic cost of zero Covid may become more salient to his political calculus, especially if China records progress in developing a domestic mRNA vaccine or oral antiviral treatment. But any relaxation of Xi’s Covid strategy would come gradually, over many months or years, to control for risks.⁶⁵

The CCP could lean back into its assertive “wolf warrior” diplomacy. Before the Party Congress, Xi’s strong political position is a disincentive for him to engage in brinkmanship with the United States or to provoke diplomatic crises, as reckless incidents could create political risks for himself. Xi will certainly continue to respond to foreign criticism, retaliate against Western sanctions, and assert Chinese sovereignty claims, but his power gives him more breathing room to resist nationalist pressure for extreme responses while he focuses on the Party Congress. Indeed, the importance to Xi of controlling leadership turnover could mean that he and other senior leaders have less bandwidth for diplomacy this year, contributing to Beijing’s growing isolation in Western capitals and impeding global progress on economic recovery and climate change. After the Party Congress, however, China’s foreign assertiveness will likely grow, and US-China “strategic competition” become more ideological.⁶⁶ Indeed, Xi’s history resolution said the CCP “must not be misguided or intimidated” by foreign opposition in “the contest between the two ideologies and two social systems of socialism and capitalism.”

⁶³ Neil Thomas et al, [Xi’s drive for “common prosperity” embeds a more muscular regulatory agenda](#), Eurasia Group, 24 September 2021.

⁶⁴ Yuan Zhang et al, [‘On Coexistence with COVID-19: Estimations and Perspectives,’](#) *China CDC Weekly*, Vol. 3, Issue 50, 2021, pp. 1057-1061.

⁶⁵ Allison Sherlock et al, [“Zero Covid” Policy Likely to Persist Through 2022](#), Eurasia Group, 23 November 2021; Michael Hirson et al, [‘Greater Disruption in Store as Beijing Declares Zero Tolerance for Omicron,’](#) Eurasia Group, 5 January 2022.

⁶⁶ See: Neil Thomas et al, [‘Beijing’s Assertive Diplomacy is Here to Stay,’](#) Eurasia Group, 27 April 2021; Neil Thomas et al, [‘Xi’s Push to Promote “Chinese Solutions” Abroad Will Deepen US-China Competition in Developing Countries,’](#) Eurasia Group, 12 July 2021; Neil Thomas et al, [‘Beijing’s Broad Economic Diplomacy with Developing World Will Partially Offset Washington’s Deep But Narrow Security Diplomacy With Allies and Partners,’](#) Eurasia Group, 10 December 2021.

The CCP could use its PLA to re-escalate tensions in territorial disputes. If Xi remains in control ahead of the Party Congress, then his incentive to significantly escalate tensions in security hotspots would seem to decrease. For example, it's highly doubtful that Xi would pursue decisive action against Taiwan this year, because the possibility of failure creates an unacceptable risk to Xi's position. Drastic moves are similarly unlikely in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Sino-Indian border areas. The conclusion of the Party Congress would not suddenly make any invasion scenarios likely, but it could encourage Xi to escalate gray-zone tactics to advance China's contested territorial claims and expand the global reach of the PLA.

6. To what extent is Xi under any kind of pressure to transfer any of his responsibilities or titles? Who or what comes after Xi? Is anyone being groomed to replace him?

Xi appears to be under little pressure to transfer any of his responsibilities or titles. The selection of CCP leaders results from internal political wrangling among the Party elite and given that Xi dominates Chinese politics in a way not seen for decades, it is difficult to see where any such pressure would come from. And, given Xi's obsession with law-based governance and the formalization of his own rule, it appears likely that he would rather hold positions of formal power than "rule from behind the curtain" (垂帘听政) as an informal paramount leader, like Deng Xiaoping did from ~1978-1994. The NPC's deletion of presidential term limits from the PRC Constitution in March 2018 removed the only formal barrier to Xi's indefinite tenure as head of the Party, state, and military. Xi would only have to exempt himself from the "seven up, eight down" (七上八下) norm, introduced in 2002, that leaders aged 68 years or older do not win reappointment to the Politburo. For Xi, this move seems well within his political abilities, and CCP officials early on suggested that Xi may not abide by this norm.⁶⁷ The only circumstances under which it seems plausible that Xi could face serious pressure to transfer any of his power at the 20th Party Congress is a crisis so severe that even Xi's allies come to see his leadership as a threat to regime survival, such as an economic depression or a failed invasion of Taiwan.

We do not know who or what will come after Xi because he has not anointed a successor. When Xi became General Secretary in 2012, prevailing norms suggested that he would serve only two five-year terms and would designate a successor by promoting a Politburo member aged 57 or younger to the PBSC at the 19th Party Congress in 2017.⁶⁸ That this did not happen is further evidence that Xi plans to rule indefinitely. Xi seems to have no incentive to identify an heir apparent, as to do so would risk making himself a lame duck, empowering a dangerous rival, and alienating allies who lack strong ties to the chosen replacement. If we assume that Xi faces no meaningful opposition or pressure to transfer power, then it is unlikely that he will indicate a successor at the forthcoming 20th Party Congress. This means that he will probably either elevate no potential successors to the PBSC or promote several potential successors who all lack clear claims to the role. Xi's supporters may pressure him to name a successor if he becomes frail, or if he begins to make truly calamitous political errors or policy mistakes, but

⁶⁷ E.g., Ting Shi and Keith Zhai, '[Will Xi Bend Retirement "Rule" to Keep Top Officials in Power](#),' *Bloomberg News*, 31 October 2016.

⁶⁸ An age that would allow for three PBSC terms, including two as leader, under the "seven up, eight down" norm.

absent these situations Xi could conceivably rule for decades. In 2035, for example, Xi would turn 82, still three years younger than Deng when he left formal office in 1989.

Xi may resurrect the office of Party Chairman but this move seems unnecessary. There is some speculation that Xi could reintroduce a supreme office of Party “Chairman” (主席)—which was held by Mao Zedong from 1945-1976 before being abolished in 1982—and thereby transfer one or more of his current roles to a potential successor while remaining in control of the Party.⁶⁹ But this step would produce the same downsides outlined in the preceding paragraph, while appearing unnecessary for Xi to consolidate his power. Xi faces no legal barrier to retaining his top posts. Removing presidential term limits was a requirement for Xi’s continued rule; becoming Party Chairman is not. Ultimately, personal power trumps formal titles, and holding the Chairmanship did not stop Mao’s successor Hua Guofeng from being toppled. Xi just got a “history resolution”—a triumph virtually unimaginable for Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin—making it unlikely that he feels the need to spend political capital on appointing himself Party Chairman.

*A disorderly post-Xi succession is a significant and underappreciated political risk.*⁷⁰ If Xi does not specify a clear succession plan, which seems unlikely for at least the next few years, then his unexpected demise or incapacitation would create the risk of disorderly succession. If Xi “goes to meet Marx,” the CCP Constitution suggests that the Central Committee would meet to select a new General Secretary from the current PBSC and to select a new CMC Chair (who may or may not be the same person as the new General Secretary).⁷¹ The PRC Constitution says the Presidency would be assumed by the Vice President (who is unlikely to be a viable candidate to become the new General Secretary), although this appointment may have to be confirmed by the National People’s Congress.⁷² In reality, the one or more persons who end up being appointed to these three leadership positions will be decided by informal bargaining by Party elites. Many people inside and outside of China may want to see the end of Xi’s rule, but there is no way of knowing if what comes next would be better, worse, or about the same. Could Xi’s removal enable Party elites to return to more market-oriented reforms and constructive diplomacy? Could there be a seamless power transition to a Xi acolyte who continues Xi’s policy agenda? Could a factional power struggle between rival groups of former Xi supporters herald an extended period of political uncertainty and economic turbulence? Could PLA generals seize control in a military coup and launch a period of extraordinary domestic repression and foreign aggression? These possibilities all exist. We just do not know which is most likely.

⁶⁹ Ling Li, ‘[The Third Road: Where Will Xi Jinping Go in 2022?](#),’ *Made in China Journal*, 1 November 2021; Donald Clarke and Ling Li, ‘[Xi Jinping’s Third Road: A Response](#),’ *Made in China Journal*, 3 November 2021.

⁷⁰ See: Richard McGregor and Jude Blanchette, ‘[After Xi: Future Scenarios for Leadership Succession in Post-Xi Jinping Era](#),’ Center for Strategic & International Studies, 21 April 2021.

⁷¹ [中国共产党党章](#), Article 23.

⁷² [中华人民共和国宪法](#), Articles 79-84; McGregor and Blanchette, op cit.

7. Who are the most influential people in China's political system today, aside from Xi Jinping? How might their political stature and influence change at the forthcoming Party Congress?⁷³

The most influential people in China's political system are notionally the seven members of the CCP Politburo's Standing Committee (PBSC). The CCP's Leninist organizational structure relies on a rigid hierarchy to process information, make decisions, and enforce compliance among its officeholders and members. The PBSC is the top authority. The General Secretary is thought to convene a PBSC meeting roughly weekly to address domestic and foreign issues of national concern, such as Covid-19, Five Year Plans, Xinjiang, natural disasters, economic policy, and Xi's anti-poverty campaign. PBSC members are the only CCP leaders who rank at the "full-national level" (正国级), a half-level above other members of the Politburo, who are at the "deputy national level" (副国级). The CCP only rarely publishes readouts of PBSC meetings (but it does so regularly for Politburo meetings and study sessions).⁷⁴ While all PBSC members are important, Xi's dominance means those who are not politically aligned with him, such as Li Keqiang and Wang Yang, wield less power over national policymaking than their positions suggest.

Xi likely wants to consolidate his influence in the CCP by installing more political allies on the PBSC after the Party Congress. Predicting personnel appointments after a Party Congress is a notoriously fraught exercise. Back-room politicking is the decisive factor in who gets promoted, who gets sidelined, and who gets purged. But a few credible assumptions make the task more tractable, even though there's no guarantee they will hold perfectly:

- Xi will not spend political capital to break Party norms unless necessary (e.g., Xi did not force Li Keqiang into early retirement at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, despite media speculation to the contrary).
- Xi will thus exempt only himself from the "seven up, eight down" retirement norm and other leaders turning 68 or older this year will retire (e.g., Xi ally Wang Qishan left the PBSC in 2017; this norm also helps avoid long-time deputies becoming rivals).
- Xi will respect most current conventions about the structure of elite politics and the experiences necessary for cadres to win promotion to certain roles (e.g., that the PBSC has seven members who occupy the same roles as listed below).
- Xi will prefer to promote "allies" to expand the "faction" of cadres who owe their roles to him and are more likely to support his leadership (e.g., people who Xi knows through family, friendship, education, and work, or who have such ties to Xi's inner circle).

⁷³ This section is based on analysis of open-source information available from Chinese government websites and media publications. Some parts of it draw on earlier work: Neil Thomas, [‘Ties That Bind: Xi's People on the Politburo,’](#) MacroPolo, 17 June 2020; Neil Thomas, [‘Eye on 2022 \(Part 1\): Rising Stars in the Provinces,’](#) MacroPolo, 26 January 2021; Neil Thomas, [‘Eye on 2022 \(Part 2\): Rising Stars in Beijing,’](#) MacroPolo, 16 February 2021; Neil Thomas and Michael Hirson, [‘Xi Continues to Consolidate Power, Signaling Gradual Progress on Structural Reforms,’](#) Eurasia Group, 28 October 2021; and various Twitter threads published through the account [@neilthomas123](#). Also: Cheng Li, [‘Xi Jinping's Inner Circle \(Parts 1-5\),’](#) *China Leadership Monitor*, 2014-2015; Sebastian Heilmann (ed.), [China's Political System](#), Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

⁷⁴ CCP Organization Department, [中共中央政治局常务委员会会议](#); CCP Central Committee, [中央政治局会议](#); CCP Central Committee, [中央政治局集体学习](#).

The list below provides a snapshot of each current PBSC member and a cautious assessment of their political prospects after the 20th Party Congress (listed in rank order):

1. Xi Jinping 习近平 (very likely to stay in his current roles)
 - Age in 2022: 69
 - Faction: Himself
 - Key Roles: General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee, Chairman of the CCP Central Military Commission, President of the PRC
 - Explanation: See discussion above.
2. Li Keqiang 李克强 (more likely than not to retire)
 - Age in 2022: 67
 - Faction: Tuanpai (Communist Youth League of China)
 - Key Role: Premier of the PRC State Council
 - Explanation: Li Keqiang was Xi's main rival when they were both emerging as future leaders in the 1990s and 2000s, and both were catapulted directly onto the PBSC from the Central Committee in 2007. Li was an economic "liberal" who rocketed up the CYLC ranks and was seen as closer to Hu Jintao, while Xi was helped by his status as the "princeling" scion of a revolutionary family and was favored by Hu's predecessor and rival Jiang Zemin. Li served as Party Secretary of Henan, Party Secretary of Liaoning, and First-Ranked Vice Premier before becoming Premier in 2013. Since becoming General Secretary, Xi has usurped the Premier's leadership in economic policy and sidelined the Tuanpai faction, leaving Li a powerful administrator but a weak decision-maker. The PRC Constitution limits the Premier to two five-year terms, so Li will step down in March 2023. He is just young enough to stay on the PBSC, but he can only move downward in the political hierarchy and his retirement would allow Xi to place another ally on the top body. In the post-Mao era, the precedent for departing Premiers is that the first two, Hua Guofeng and Zhao Ziyang, became the top CCP leader, then Li Peng became NPCSC Chairman before retiring, before the last two, Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao, went straight into retirement. Li is a weaker figure than all five of his forerunners and is therefore more likely to retire.
3. Li Zhanshu 栗战书 (likely to retire)
 - Age in 2022: 72
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Role: Chairman of the Standing Committee of the PRC National People's Congress (NPCSC)
 - Explanation: Li Zhanshu leads China's top legislative body, a key role in Xi's law-based governance. Li became close with Xi when they overlapped as Party Secretaries of neighboring counties in Hebei from 1983-1985. Li spent his early career in his native Hebei, followed by stints in Shaanxi and Heilongjiang, before serving as Governor of Heilongjiang and Party Secretary of Guizhou. Li was then promoted to the Politburo as Director of the CCP General Office—the powerful administrative organ of the Central Committee—from 2012-2017, before he became NPCSC Chairman in 2018. Li will retire due to age.

4. Wang Yang 汪洋 (likely to stay in his current role or perhaps become Premier)
 - Age in 2022: 67
 - Faction: Tuanpai
 - Key Role: Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)
 - Explanation: Wang Yang leads China’s top political advisory body, which is the premier institution of the CCP’s “United Front” system to co-opt non-Party members, professional and social groups, and ethnic minorities to support CCP interests. Wang came up in Anhui, was brought to Beijing to work at the central planning agency and the State Council, then served as Party Secretary of Chongqing and made the Politburo in 2007 as Party Secretary of Guangdong, where he was an advocate for market-oriented reforms. Wang should stay on the PBSC and could take over as Premier—he was a Vice-Premier from 2008-2013—but such a move would be unusual (see item on Hu Chunhua below). Two of his three most recent predecessors as CPPCC Chairman served a second term.
5. Wang Huning 王沪宁 (likely to stay in his current roles)
 - Age in 2022: 67
 - Faction: None (loyal advisor to Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and now Xi Jinping)
 - Key Roles: First-Ranked Secretary of the CCP Central Secretariat, Director of the Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization (CGCBSC)
 - Explanation: Wang Huning is thought to be Xi’s top ideologue and the intellectual architect behind many of his major policies. His position as CGCBSC Director means he leads propaganda and ideology work. His role in the Central Secretariat places him atop the working agency that controls the day-to-day administration of the Politburo and the PBSC. Wang also served as a deputy chief (along with Li Zhanshu) of the working group that oversaw the drafting of Xi’s history resolution. Wang started out as a star professor of international politics at Fudan University in Shanghai, before Jiang Zemin recruited him to Beijing in 1995 to work at the CCP Policy Research Office, which he led from 2002-2020, entering the Politburo in 2012. Wang’s lack of other experience means that he is best suited to his current roles on the PBSC, for which he appears indispensable.
6. Zhao Leji 赵乐际 (likely to stay in his current role or be promoted to NPCSC Chairman)
 - Age in 2022: 65
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Role: Secretary of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI)
 - Explanation: Zhao Leji leads the CCP’s internal watchdog, which is responsible for enforcing regulations and implementing Xi’s anti-corruption campaign. Zhao spent the first three decades of his career in his birth province of Qinghai, eventually serving as Party Secretary of Qinghai before moving to become Party Secretary of Shaanxi and then win a Politburo seat in 2012 as Director of the CCP Organization Department, which oversees personnel appointments. Zhao is thought to have developed close ties with Xi through their shared family connections to Shaanxi Province, where both Li and Xi’s parents are from. Xi’s

control of the CCDI has been crucial to his consolidation of power within the CCP, and so Xi may want Zhao to stay put. An alternative, given the last two-term CCDI Secretary left office in 2002 and Zhao has not served as a Vice Premier, would be a promotion to oversee law-based governance as NPCSC Chairman.

7. Han Zheng 韩正 (likely to retire)

- Age in 2022: 68
- Faction: Jiang Zemin/Xi Jinping
- Key Roles: First-Ranked Vice Premier of the PRC State Council
- Explanation: Han Zheng spent his entire pre-PBSC career as a cadre in Shanghai, serving as Mayor from 2003-2012 and on the Politburo as Party Secretary from 2012-2017. Han was associated with the “Shanghai Gang” of Jiang Zemin allies (Jiang was a city leader from 1985-1989) that dominated Chinese politics in the 1990s and 2000s. However, Han worked under Xi when the latter served as Party Secretary of Shanghai from March to October of 2007, a connection that likely contributed to his appointment to the PBSC in 2017. Han will retire due to age.

Many Xi allies are likely to see their political stature and influence grow at the forthcoming Party Congress, but especially those that win promotion to the PBSC. The analysis above suggests that at least two, and likely three, PBSC members will retire this year, creating vacancies that Xi will attempt to fill at the Party Congress. While Xi does not appear to be grooming anyone to succeed him, PBSC members still matter because they hold significant administrative power in the institutions that they lead, which gives them some leeway to emphasize specific policy agendas within the political boundaries set by Xi-dominated national decision-making. The composition of the next PBSC will also provide hard information about the extent to which Xi continues to dominate the Chinese political system. If we assume that Xi respects the strong post-Mao norm that new PBSC members are selected from the previous Politburo, and that Politburo members who turn 68 or older this year will retire, then nine non-PBSC Politburo members will step down this year while nine will stay on and be eligible for promotion to the PBSC. The nine set to retire are: Xi allies Chen Xi, Wang Chen, Yang Xiaodu, Xu Qiliang, Zhang Youxia, and Liu He (more on Liu below); Tuanpai ally Sun Chunlan; Jiang Zemin ally Guo Shengkun; and foreign policy specialist Yang Jiechi. The list below provides a snapshot of each non-retiring Politburo member and a cautious assessment of their political prospects (listed in stroke order of Chinese surname, as in CCP documents):

- Ding Xuexiang 丁薛祥 (more likely [than others in this list] to win promotion to the PBSC)
 - Age in 2022: 60
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Roles: Second-Ranked Secretary of the CCP Central Secretariat, Director of the CCP General Office, Director of the Office of the CCP National Security Commission, Director of the Office of the PRC President
 - Explanation: Ding is Xi’s closest personal aide and is effectively his chief-of-staff. The General Office he runs is the working body of the Central Committee and controls key administrative functions like information flows, meeting agendas, and document drafting. Official media show that Ding accompanies Xi to virtually

all his political engagements and domestic and foreign travels. Ding enjoyed a rapid rise after serving as Xi's principal secretary when Xi was Party Secretary of Shanghai in 2007. Most new Politburo members were full members of the previous Central Committee, but Ding was one of four alternate members who won direct promotion to the Politburo in 2017 (along with fellow Xi allies Li Xi, Li Qiang, and Huang Kunming). Ding's predecessor, Li Zhanshu (also a close Xi ally), was promoted to the PBSC as NPCSC Chairman, but should retire this year. Ding could follow directly in Li's footsteps. Ding's main weakness is that, unlike most previous PBSC members, he has not served as a provincial Party Secretary or Governor. However, some leaders, such as Wang Huning and Wen Jiabao, have been elevated to the PBSC before without such experience. Ding is also one of only three Politburo members who are young enough to serve two five-year terms on the PBSC, along with Hu Chunhua and Chen Min'er (see below).

- Li Xi 李希 (somewhat less likely to win promotion to the PBSC)
 - Age in 2022: 66
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Role: Party Secretary of Guangdong Province
 - Explanation: Li Xi is thought to have become close with Xi after working for an associate of Xi's father in Gansu in the 1980s. Li also worked closely with Zhao Leji when the latter was Party Secretary of Shaanxi and sat on the Shanghai CCP Standing Committee with several Xi allies from 2011-2014. Li's ties with Xi mean that he certainly has a shot at the PBSC, but his role suggests he may be less of a chance than other Xi allies. The last three leaders of Guangdong all next served as the Third-Ranked Vice Premier, a central promotion but not on the PBSC. The Guangdong job is also usually given to a young rising star—Hu Chunhua was 49, Wang Yang was 52, and Zheng Dejiang was 56 in the years they started—but Li was appointed in the year he turned 61, the oldest appointee since 1985.
- Li Qiang 李强 (somewhat more likely to win promotion to the PBSC)
 - Age in 2022: 63
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Role: Party Secretary of Shanghai Municipality
 - Explanation: Li Qiang was a senior cadre in Zhejiang when Xi was provincial Party Secretary from 2002-2007 and worked closely with Xi after becoming Secretary-General of the provincial CCP Committee in 2004. The choice of Li to lead Shanghai suggests he is destined for promotion. Since 1987, every Party Secretary of Shanghai has gone on to win a PBSC seat (the exception is Chen Liangyu, a Jiang Zemin ally who Hu Jintao purged on corruption charges in 2006). Like his predecessor Han Zheng, Li could become First-Ranked Vice Premier.
- Li Hongzhong 李鸿忠 (unlikely to win promotion to the PBSC)
 - Age in 2022: 66
 - Faction: Jiang Zemin/Xi Jinping
 - Key Role: Party Secretary of Tianjin Municipality
 - Explanation: Li Hongzhong was a frontrunner in promoting Xi as the "leadership core" of the CCP, which he first did in January 2016, while Party Secretary of

Hubei. Li became Party Secretary of Tianjin—a position associated with a Politburo seat since 1987—in September 2016, just one month before the Central Committee officially elevated Xi to “core” status and 13 months before the selection of the new Politburo after the 19th Party Congress. However, for most of Li’s career he was closely associated with Jiang Zemin’s faction, and his strenuous assertions of loyalty may not be enough to beat Xi’s long-time allies to the PBSC. Li could stay on the Politburo as a Vice Premier or CCP agency director.

- Hu Chunhua 胡春华 (wildcard to win promotion to the PBSC)
 - Age in 2022: 59
 - Faction: Tuanpai
 - Key Role: Third-Ranked Vice Premier of the PRC State Council
 - Explanation: Hu Chunhua is perhaps the biggest wildcard for promotion to the PBSC. On the one hand, Hu is a rising star with the strongest claim to replace Li Keqiang on the PBSC as Premier, as every Premier since Hua Guofeng (1976-1980) was appointed directly from a Vice Premier position, and all the current Vice Premiers except Hu are due to retire from the Politburo this year. Also, all but one Premier since Li Peng (1987-1998) has served two terms, and Hu is one of only three Politburo members young enough to stay on the PBSC for that long. On the other hand, Hu is the leader in this list with the weakest ties to Xi, and is strongly associated with the Tuanpai faction, having led the CYLC from 2006-2008. Hu’s political future is where the assumptions about Xi’s decision-making come most into conflict with each other. What could tip the balance in Hu’s favor is that Xi has significantly weakened both the Premier role and the Tuanpai faction, so promoting Hu would create little political threat and avoid possible speculation about succession if Xi appointed an ally to the role. However, elevating Hu would deprive Xi the opportunity to reward a loyalist.
- Chen Quanguo 陈全国 (unlikely to win promotion to the PBSC)
 - Age in 2022: 67
 - Faction: Tuanpai
 - Key Role: None; ex-Party Secretary of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region
 - Explanation: Chen Quanguo served as Party Secretary of Xinjiang from 2016 to December 2021, but the CCP has yet to assign him a new position. Chen oversaw the CCP’s draconian ethnic assimilation policies toward Uyghurs and other Muslim peoples in Xinjiang, many of which were approved by Xi himself. His recent removal from office was not necessarily a punishment or a promotion, as it aligned with standard periods for rotating provincial-level leaders. However, Chen is unlikely to make the PBSC, and may even retire from the Politburo, because he lacks strong ties to Xi and was more aligned with Li Keqiang’s Tuanpai faction earlier in his career. Additionally, Chen’s predecessor, Zhang Chunxian, lost his Politburo seat in 2017—despite being younger than Chen at the time and tipped for big things—possibly due to his links with Jiang Zemin.
- Chen Min’er 陈敏尔 (more likely to win promotion to the PBSC)
 - Age in 2022: 62
 - Faction: Xi Jinping

- Key Role: Party Secretary of Chongqing Municipality
- Explanation: Chen Min'er is seen as one of Xi's closest political allies. Chen was the provincial propaganda chief when Xi served as Party Secretary of Zhejiang from 2002-2007 and has close professional ties with other Xi allies who worked in Zhejiang. He later served as Vice Governor of Zhejiang and Governor then Party Secretary of Guizhou. Chen's role in Chongqing means that little precedent exists about what his next move might be. Chongqing has only had a Politburo seat since 2007, and its last two full-time holders, Bo Xilai and Sun Zhengcai, were both purged and imprisoned. More generally, Chen's relatively strong background in provincial leadership means he would be a candidate for the PBSC as First-Ranked Vice Premier and perhaps even as an outside chance for Premier, although becoming CCDI Secretary or NPCSC Chairman are also possibilities.
- Huang Kunming 黄坤明 (somewhat less likely to win promotion to the PBSC)
 - Age in 2022: 66
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Roles: Sixth-Ranked Secretary of the CCP Central Secretariat, Director of the CCP Propaganda Department
 - Explanation: Huang Kunming is another one of Xi's closest associates from his provincial career, having worked under Xi both in Fujian (as a prefectural official in Fuzhou while Xi was the city's Party Secretary from 1990-1996) and Zhejiang (where he led Huzhou and Jiaxing cities while Xi was provincial Party Secretary from 2002-2007). Despite these close ties to Xi, Huang appears less likely to win a PBSC seat than other Xi allies because only one propaganda chief has been promoted to the PBSC since 1980. That was Liu Yunshan (2002-2012), who headed the CCP Central Secretariat and CGCBSC from 2012-2017, roles that Wang Huning now holds and is likely to retain after the Party Congress. Huang could stay in his position; two of his last three predecessors served two terms.
- Cai Qi 蔡奇 (less likely to win promotion to the PBSC)
 - Age in 2022: 67
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Role: Party Secretary of Beijing Municipality
 - Explanation: Cai Qi enjoyed a meteoric political rise under Xi. In 2017, he and Yang Xiaodu were "helicoptered" from outside the Central Committee straight into the Politburo, an extremely rare promotion that was last seen in 1992. Cai had overlapped with Xi in Fujian from 1985-1999, and then again in Zhejiang from 2002-2007, and must have made an impression. Cai will likely remain on the Politburo, perhaps as a Vice Premier or as Director of the CCP Organization Department, but the PBSC is unlikely. Cai has experienced leadership difficulties and a Party Secretary of Beijing has not made the PBSC since 2002.

Ultimately, the most influential people in China's political system today are those closest to Xi, which means that this group also includes cadres outside the PBSC or even the Politburo. The list below, while far from exhaustive, provides a snapshot of some important Xi allies unlikely to make the next PBSC and an assessment of their prospects (listed in rough order of importance):

- Liu He 刘鹤 (likely to retire from the Politburo but may become PRC Vice President)
 - Age in 2022: 72
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Roles: Fourth-Ranked Vice Premier of the PRC State Council, Director of the Office of the CCP Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission, Chair of the PRC State Council Financial Stability and Development Committee
 - Explanation: Liu He is widely seen as Xi's closest economic adviser and a key figure in macro policy, financial de-risking, and US-China trade negotiations. More influential than his formal roles would usually indicate, he accompanies Xi to many of his meetings and on many of his domestic and foreign trips. Liu and Xi go way back to their childhoods in Beijing as the privileged offspring of senior officials in the 1960s (before the Cultural Revolution). However, Liu's age means he should retire after his first term on the Politburo ends in 2022, which is why Xi may try to keep him close to the center of power by appointing him to the high-ranking but largely ceremonial role of PRC Vice President. Liu would replace Wang Qishan, a close Xi ally who became Vice President in 2017 after having to retire from the Politburo (and PBSC) due to age norms. Wang is likely to step down because no Vice President has ever served more than one five-year term. Whatever position Liu receives after the Party Congress, he will keep Xi's ear.
- He Lifeng 何立峰 (contender for promotion to the Politburo)
 - Age in 2022: 67
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Roles: Director of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Vice Chairman of the CPPCC
 - Explanation: He Lifeng, like Liu He, attends an unusual number of Xi's meetings and accompanies him on many domestic and sometimes foreign travels. He rose through the political ranks in Fujian while Xi worked there from 1985-2002 and was Deputy Director then Director of the municipal Public Finance Bureau in Xiamen when Xi was Vice Mayor there from 1985-1988. The appointment of He as NDRC Director in 2017 meant Xi had a close associate in charge of the agency responsible for overseeing China's Five-Year Plans. The next year, He won an unusual appointment to serve concurrently as a CPPCC Vice Chairman, a role that elevated his political rank from ministerial level to deputy national level. This move likely reflected Xi's desire to keep He around, as the retirement age of 65 for ministerial level officials would otherwise have forced He out before the Party Congress, while the retirement age for deputy national level officials is 67. If He wins promotion, he will likely become a Vice Premier of the State Council.
- Meng Xiangfeng 孟祥锋 (contender for promotion to the Politburo)
 - Age in 2022: 58
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Role: First-Ranked Deputy Director of the CCP General Office
 - Explanation: Meng Xiangfeng is a solid contender to replace Ding Xuexiang as Director of the CCP General Office, a Politburo position since 1997. Since 1986, every new Director, except for Li Zhanshu in 2012, has been promoted from

serving as a Deputy Director. Meng's appointment to Deputy Director in October 2020 suggests that he is trusted by Xi to run this extremely sensitive "nerve center" of CCP operations. He is also young enough to serve two Politburo terms and previously worked under Xi allies Cai Qi in Hangzhou and Chen Xi in Liaoning.

- Chen Yixin 陈一新 (contender for promotion to the Politburo)
 - Age in 2022: 63
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Roles: Secretary-General of the CCP Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (CPLAC); Deputy Director of the CCP Central Comprehensive Law-Based Governance Commission
 - Explanation: Chen Yixin has for some time been fancied the frontrunner to replace Guo Shengkun (who is due to retire) as CPLAC Secretary, the top law enforcement official, and a Politburo role since 1998. That's because Chen worked closely under Xi when the latter was Party Secretary of Zhejiang from 2002-2007 and now leads Xi's political rectification campaign of the law enforcement apparatus. Counting against Chen, however, is that the last three CPLAC Secretaries were all promoted from being Minister of Public Security. The current Minister, Zhao Kezhi, is too old for the next Politburo, but, last November, Beijing promoted the top-ranked Vice Minister Wang Xiaohong to replace Zhao as the Ministry's Party Secretary and made Wang a CPLAC member. Wang, who turns 65 this year, worked in Fujian throughout Xi's tenure there from 1985-2002, and was a senior public security cadre in Fuzhou while Xi was the city's Party Secretary from 1990-1996. Wang's recent elevation casts some doubt on Chen's prospects. Wang is also a full Central Committee member, while Chen is only an alternate member. Other senior law enforcement leaders, such as Minister of Justice Tang Yijun (who also worked under Xi in Zhejiang) and Minister of State Security Chen Wenqing (who serves concurrently as First-Ranked Deputy Director of the Office of the National Security Commission), are also in the mix for CPLAC Secretary. Regardless, Chen will likely remain an important figure in domestic security and could potentially win a different Politburo seat, such as Director of the PRC National Supervisory Commission.
- Song Tao 宋涛 (contender for promotion to the Politburo)
 - Age in 2022: 67
 - Faction: Xi Jinping
 - Key Roles: Director of the CCP International Liaison Department (ILD), Member of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC)
 - Explanation: Song Tao is a dark horse candidate to enter the next Politburo as the CCP's top diplomat. In 2017, Xi elevated foreign policy in the Chinese system by appointing Yang Jiechi, Director of the CFAC Office, to the Politburo. But both Yang and Wang Yi, Foreign Minister since 2013 (and a State Councilor, with deputy national rank, since 2017), are due to retire. This leaves no obvious replacement for Yang. The Party Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Qi Yu, lacks foreign policy experience, and the top Vice Minister, Le Yucheng, does not yet seem to have even attained ministerial rank. That appears

to leave Song—a ministerial level leader who has served as a Vice Foreign Minister and as Ambassador to the Philippines and Guyana—as the most senior foreign policy official left. He is just young enough for a Politburo seat, he was a cadre in Fujian when Xi and his ally Cai Qi served in the provincial leadership, and his appointment would align with Xi’s rising focus on the ILD’s party-to-party diplomacy. Alternative scenarios include promoting Qi Yu or Le Yucheng, or dropping the foreign policy portfolio, but the elevation of lower-ranked “wolf warriors” like Hua Chunying or Zhao Lijian is very unlikely.

Every person on the above lists is both a man and a member of the Han ethnic majority. This fact highlights the lack of diversity in the Party elite. The next 25-member Politburo will likely include only one woman—probably Shen Yiqin, Party Secretary of Guizhou Province (and the only female head of a province), who is also a member of the Bai ethnic minority—and no Politburo has ever contained more than two (2012-2017). Previously, the only non-Han person to serve on the Politburo after 1985 was Hui Liangyu, from the Hui ethnic minority, who held a seat from 2002-2012. No female or member of an ethnic minority has ever served on the PBSC.

8. Recommendations

First, Congress should not overestimate the United States’ ability to influence Chinese politics. Some recent analysis has suggested the United States could change the balance of power in Beijing. Last January a “former senior government official” wrote a report that claimed “the CCP is significantly divided on Xi’s leadership and his vast ambitions” and that therefore “the central focus of an effective US and allied China strategy must be directed at the internal fault lines of domestic Chinese politics in general and concerning Xi’s leadership in particular.”⁷⁵ Just months later a leading university press published a book that argued the United States should aid in “creating the conditions” whereby “Xi Jinping will very soon be removed from office in a coup d’état mounted by rivals in the top leadership” who then “launch a transition to democracy.”⁷⁶

In my view, the observable facts of Chinese elite politics do not support such conclusions, and the United States should not base its China strategy on either ousting Xi or overthrowing the CCP. For all his policy missteps, Xi is a ruthlessly brilliant political operator, and signs point to his ongoing consolidation of personal power within the Party. Neither is there much evidence that CCP rule is close to ending: the Party continues to use censorship and coercion to monopolize power, to build performance legitimacy by overseeing improved living standards for most people, and to deploy increasingly sophisticated tools of propaganda and public engagement to foster popular support. There are no serious alternatives to Xi or the CCP that the United States could support. Moreover, such US support may backfire as it could mark out political leaders for purging and generate nationalist backlash from the Chinese public. Xi has also used strong US policy against Beijing to bolster his political position through “rally-round-the-flag” appeals.

⁷⁵ Anonymous, [‘The Longer Telegram: Toward a New American China Strategy,’](#) The Atlantic Council, 28 January 2021.

⁷⁶ Roger Garside, [China Coup: The Great Leap to Freedom,](#) University of California Press, May 2021.

Second, neither should Congress underestimate the United States' ability to influence Chinese politics. Despite the limited ability of the United States to influence the composition or the fundamental policies of the Chinese leadership, US actions can influence the decision-making of Chinese leaders, in both intended and unintended ways. For examples, US-led pressure against Xi's policies in Xinjiang may have pushed Beijing to moderate its worst abuses,⁷⁷ while US sanctions on Chinese tech firms have turbocharged Beijing's drive for indigenous innovation.⁷⁸ The United States therefore must consider Beijing's reaction function when making new policies. Additionally, when it comes to grassroots politics, research about Chinese students in the United States suggests that encountering anti-Chinese discrimination "significantly reduces their belief that political reform is desirable for China and increases their support for authoritarian rule."⁷⁹ Discrimination and racism should never be acceptable, and they directly undermine US foreign policy interests, so the US government and its leaders must condemn offensive terminology, ethnic stereotyping, and racial profiling. The best way for the United States to boost its influence relative to China is it to offer a positive and welcoming alternative.

Third, Congress should invest in improving "China literacy" in the United States. It has never been more important for the United States to understand what is happening in China. Chinese leaders make decisions every day that have consequences for the United States and its citizens. Washington must navigate a challenging new era of "strategic competition" with Beijing while trying to avoid miscalculations and miscommunications that could cause conflict. The US government, as well as US firms and other US non-governmental organizations, need to enhance their ability to understand the Chinese language, Chinese government, and Chinese society. Congress should therefore devote significant resources to supporting programs for more Americans to learn the Chinese language—as well as the politics, economics, history, and culture of China—in schools, universities, and professional training institutes across the country.⁸⁰ Congress should also push the US government to make greater efforts to employ the expertise and skills of Chinese Americans, Hong Kong Americans, Taiwanese Americans, and other Americans connected to the Sinophone world. Measures that federal, state, and local governments could implement include targeted recruitment, tailored career paths, and updated security clearance procedures that ensure both rigor and non-discrimination.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Dake Kang, '[Terror & Tourism: Xinjiang Eases Its Grip, But Fear Remains](#),' *Associated Press*, 10 October 2021; Jeremy Goldkorn, '[What is Happening in Xinjiang as 2021 Draws to a Close?](#),' *SupChina*, 16 December 2021.

⁷⁸ Adam Segal, '[China's Move to Greater Self Reliance](#),' *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 December 2021.

⁷⁹ Yingjie Fan, Jennifer Pan, Zijie Shao and Yiqing Xu, '[How Discrimination Increases Chinese Overseas Students' Support for Authoritarian Rule](#),' 21st Century China Center Research Paper, No. 2020-05, 2020.

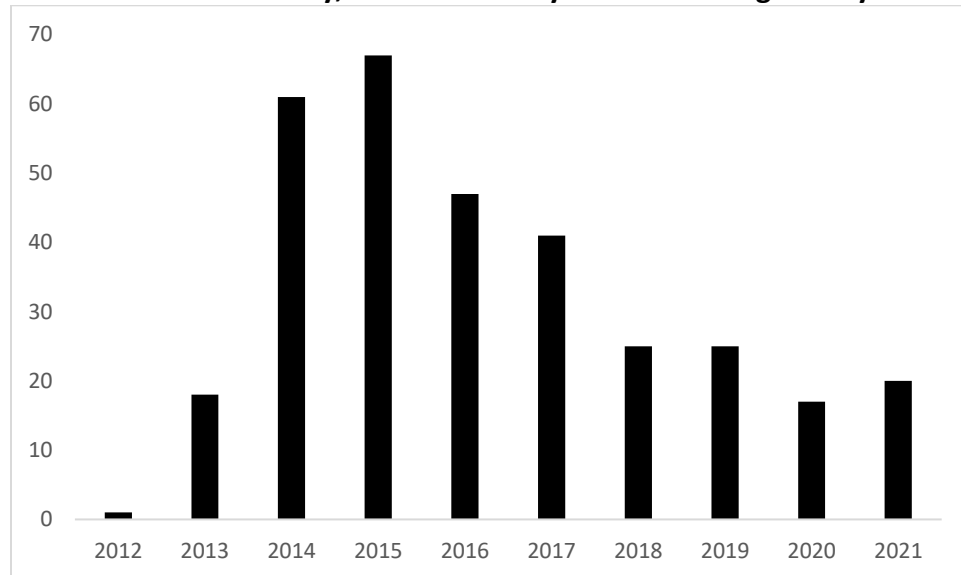
⁸⁰ Unsurprisingly, I am not the first testifier to make this recommendation. See, e.g.: Jude Blanchette, '[Testimony Prepared for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission](#),' Hearing on "What Keeps Xi Up at Night: Beijing's Internal and External Challenges," 7 February 2019.

⁸¹ On this general point, this report from Australia is also relevant to the United States: Yun Jiang, '[Chinese-Australians in the Australian Public Service](#),' The Lowy Institute, 12 April 2021.

Appendix: Charts

Chart 1

Number of Central Party, State & Military Cadres Investigated by CCDI Has Declined

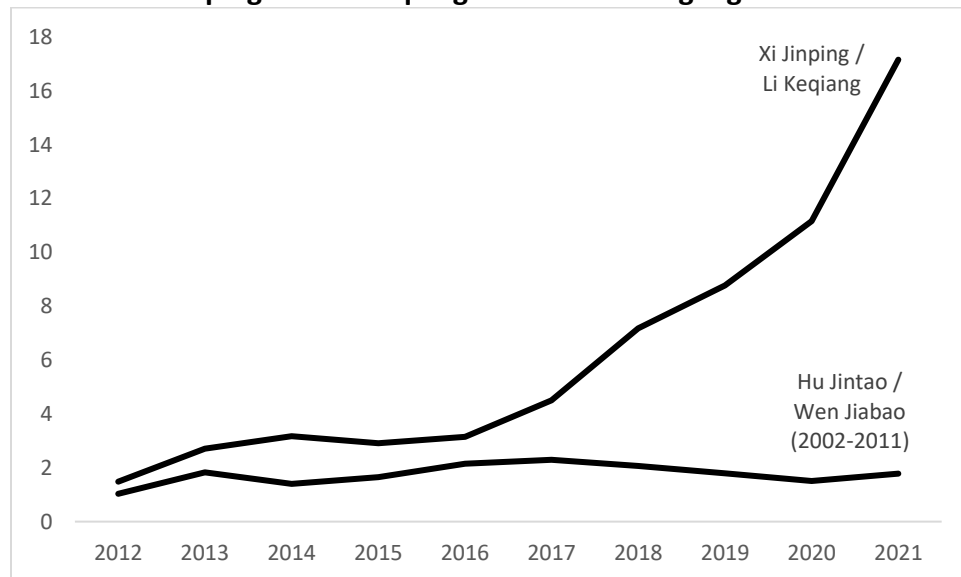


Note: Data record the year that investigations were announced into CCP cadres at the deputy ministerial level or above and into military cadres are deputy army level or above. Most investigations lead to CCP expulsion and criminal punishment.

Source: CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

Chart 2

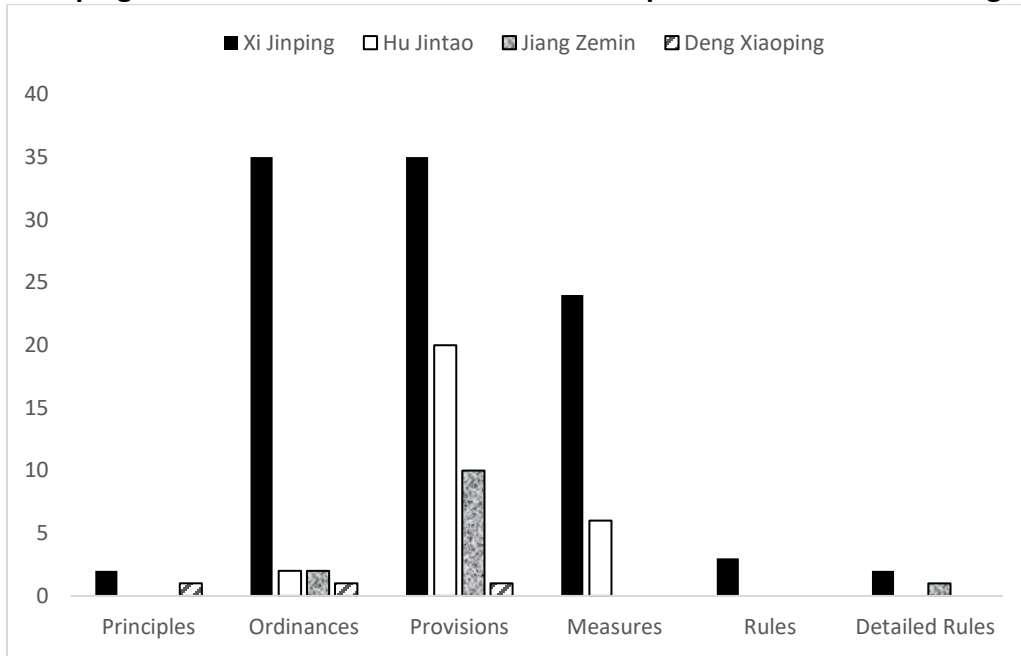
Ratio of “Xi Jinping” to “Li Keqiang” in Chinese Language Publications Continues to Rise



Source: China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI).

Chart 3

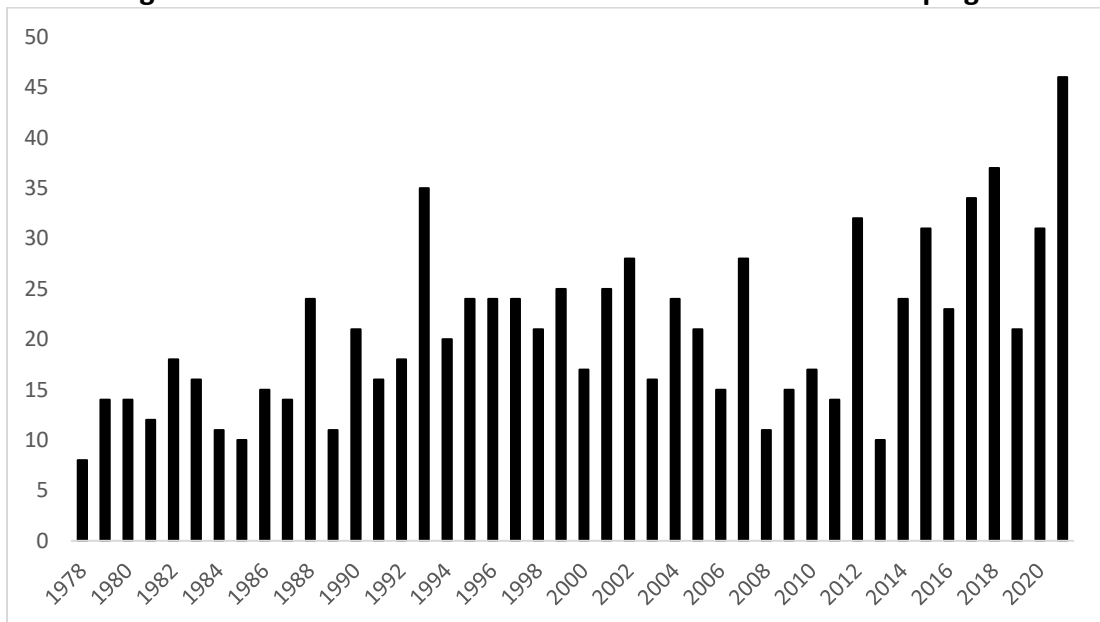
Xi Jinping has Formulated or Amended 70% of Operational Central CCP Regulations



Note: Types of central regulation are listed in descending order of authority.
Source: CCP Organization Department.

Chart 4

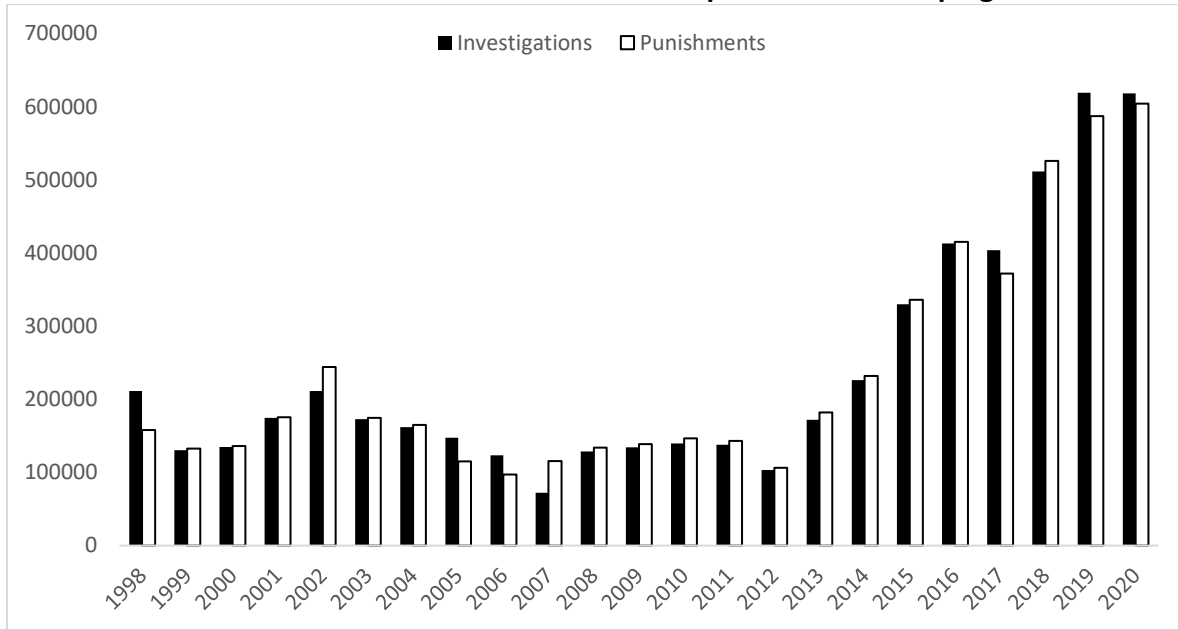
China's Legislature Has Passed a Record Number of Laws Under Xi Jinping



Note: Laws, amendments, and legal decisions made by the NPC and its Standing Committee.
Source: National People's Congress Standing Committee Reports.

Chart 5

Record Numbers of CCP Members Face Political Discipline Under Xi Jinping

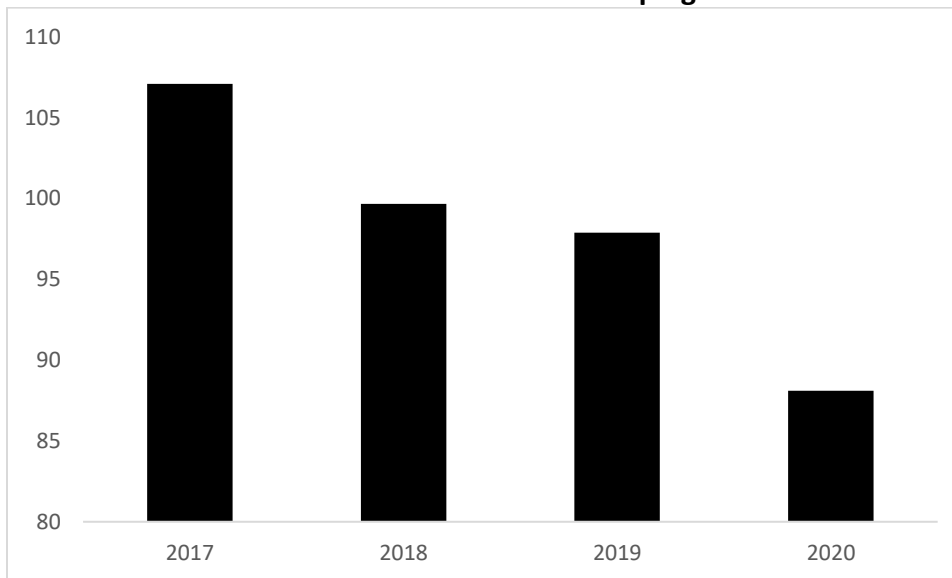


Note: Due to missing data the number of punishments in 2007 and the number of investigations in 2018 are both interpolated.

Source: CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

Chart 6

China has Reduced Air Pollution as Part of Xi Jinping’s “Three Decisive Battles”

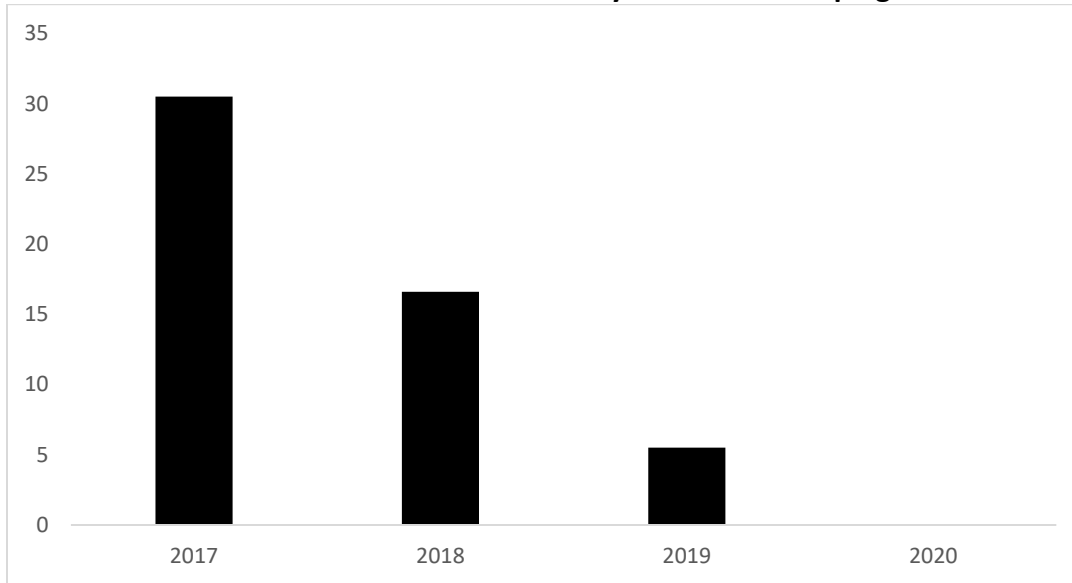


Note: Chart shows average of the annual average Air Quality Index of PM2.5 pollution in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenyang. Covid-19 shutdowns likely aided the 2020 figure.

Source: AirNow (US Department of State & US Environmental Protection Agency).

Chart 7

China Lifted Millions of Citizens Out of Poverty as Part of Xi Jinping’s “Three Decisive Battles”

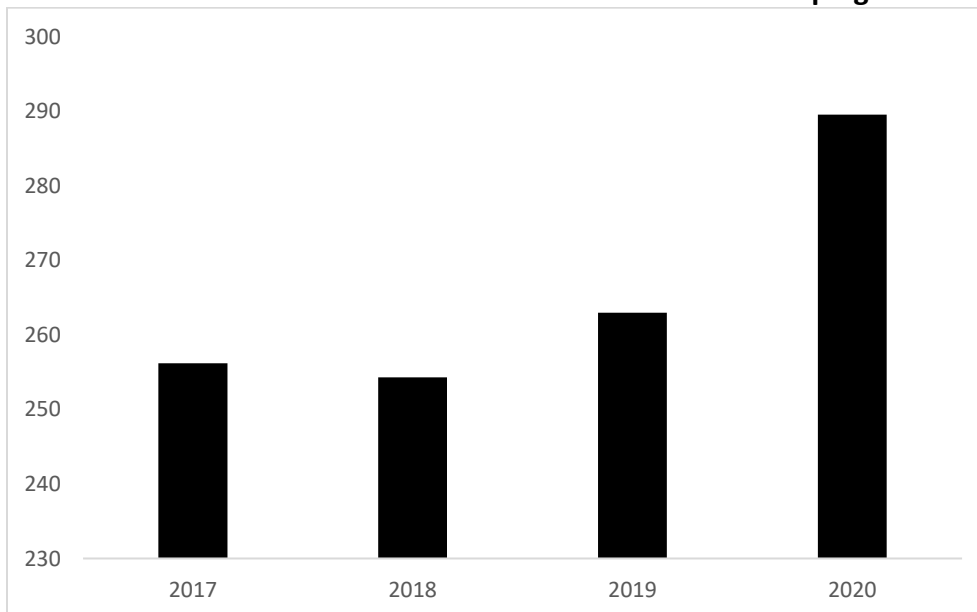


Note: Chart shows official estimates of the number of millions of impoverished rural citizens based on the 2010 national poverty line of 2300 yuan per capita (in 2010 prices).

Source: PRC National Bureau of Statistics; Terry Sicular, ‘Will China Eliminate Poverty in 2020?’, *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 December 2020.

Chart 8

China Failed to Reduce its Debt-to-GDP Ratio as Part of Xi Jinping’s “Three Decisive Battles”

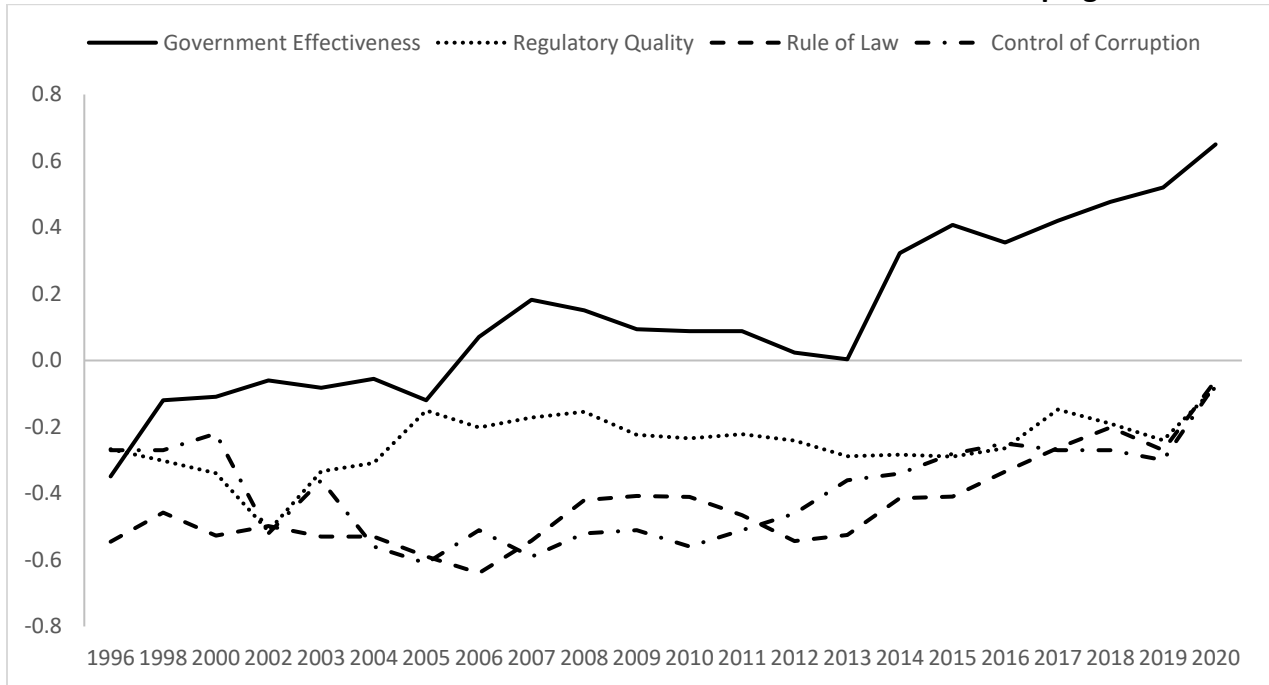


Note: Chart shows total credit to the non-financial sector as percentage of GDP.

Source: Bank of International Settlements.

Chart 9

China's Scores on Practical Governance Indicators Have Increased Under Xi Jinping

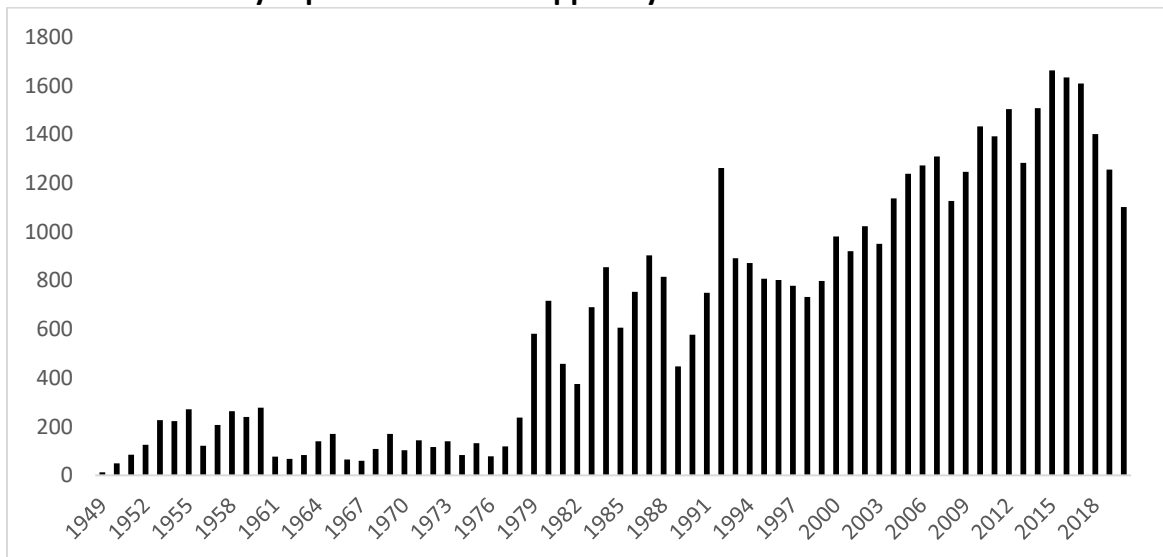


Note: Scores range from -2.5 to +2.5.

Source: World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators Project.

Chart 10

CPP Focus on Policy Experimentation Dropped by 34% from 2015-2020

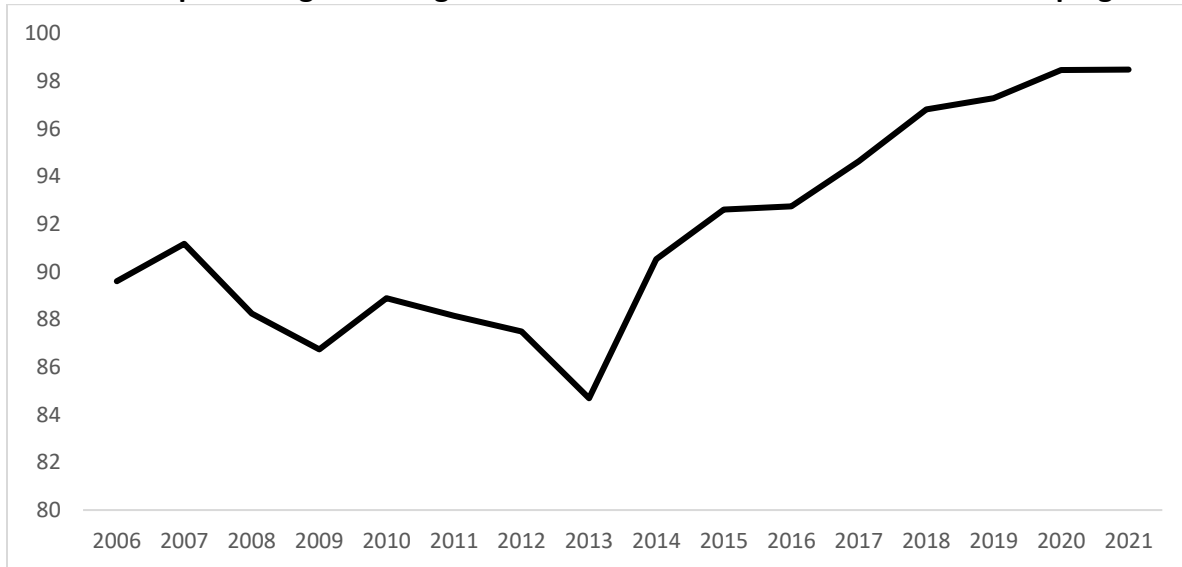


Note: Chart shows the annual number of People's Daily articles from 1949-2020 that mention "pilot programs" (试点). Data are standardized to adjust for the changing size of the newspaper.

Source: People's Daily.

Chart 11

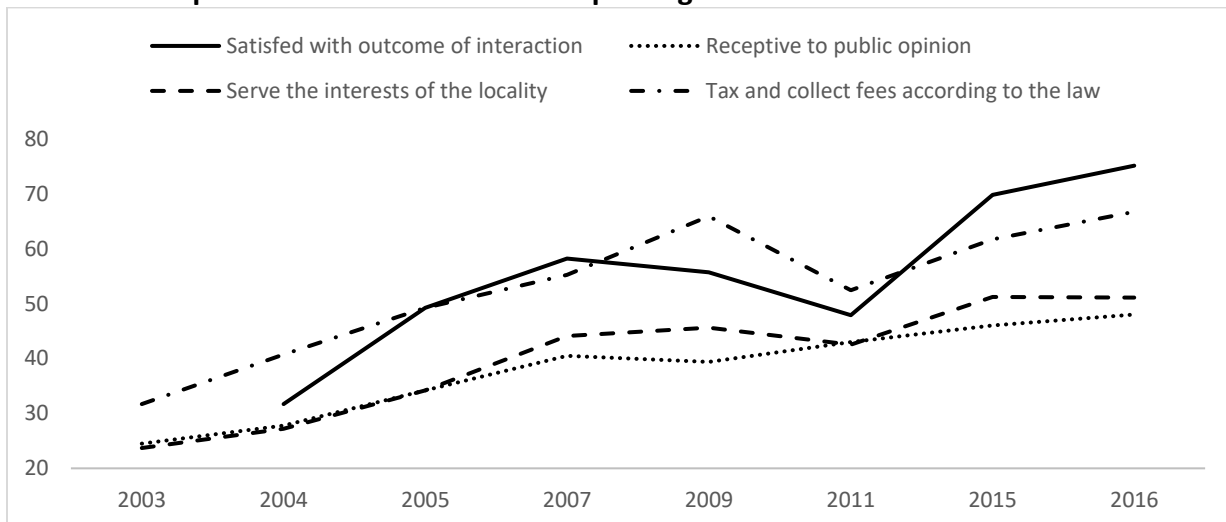
National People's Congress Delegates Cast More Affirmative Votes Under Xi Jinping



Note: Chart shows the average percentage of yes votes (out of yes, no, and abstaining votes) for six annual reports passed at the NPC: the Government Work Report, National Economic and Social Development Report, Central and Local Budgets Report, NPC Standing Committee Work Report, Supreme People's Court Work Report, Supreme People's Procuratorate Work Report. Source: Official media reports.

Chart 12

Chinese Perceptions of Local Officials are Improving



Note: Chart shows percentage of survey respondents who agreed regarding local officials. Source: Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich and Jessie Turiel, *Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time*, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard University, 2020.