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Chairwoman Bartholomew, Vice Chair Cleveland, distinguished Commissioners, and staff, thank you for inviting me to appear before you to discuss China's foreign policy decision-making under Xi Jinping.

China's domestic politics and foreign relations have both undergone significant changes under President Xi Jinping. Domestically, Xi has expanded and tightened his control and authority in all policy domains, and the long-held tradition of democratic centralism is replaced by "decision by one authority" (定于一尊). The foreign policy arena is a key area for this new model of decision-making, where Xi personally makes key decisions such as the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, the flagship project of his foreign strategy. The power concentration by Xi Jinping in foreign policy is reflected in four areas: indoctrination with the promotion of Xi Jinping Foreign Policy Thoughts, bureaucratic setup, personnel arrangements, and flagship foreign policy projects.

One important manifestation of Xi Jinping's reform of the foreign policy decision-making and concentration of power is the creation of the National Security Commission. Although the National Security Commission and Foreign Affairs Commission are both commissions under the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the bureaucratic rankings of its members are senior to those of the latter. The direct and inevitable consequence of this setup is the "securitization" of foreign policy issues and decisions. The NSC is mandated to examine all issues, foreign or domestic, through the lens of security, which by default is binary and leaves little space for either ambiguity or, more importantly, compromise, which arguably is the essence of diplomacy.

The institutional setup of China's foreign policy decision-making under Xi has directly created/contributed to China's assertive foreign policy, or the "wolf warrior diplomacy" that the world has witnessed. The strategic personality of the top leader himself leads China in the assertive direction and the institutional setup ensures his vision and grand strategy are strictly implemented without challenges from within. The bandwagon effect within the bureaucracy and the society further eliminates dissenting views. One could argue that China's expanding footprint and influence globally is the reflection of its growing national power. However, the way that the expansion is carried out, and the assertiveness and coerciveness manifested, are the direct result of Xi's political beliefs and the system he has designed to enforce his vision.

The current course of China's foreign policy is unlikely to change under Xi's leadership, which is poised to continue into the foreseeable five to ten years, at the minimum. The year of 2022 might witness some relative stabilization effort by China in its foreign relations to ensure Xi's smooth transition to the third term. However, the assertive foreign policy course appears firmly set for the foreseeable future.

I. Foreign Policy Decision-Making Authority in China

Strictly speaking, the foreign policy decision-making authority under Xi Jinping has not changed from his predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, in terms of the legal and institutional frameworks. Despite Xi's centralization of power, democratic centralism is still enshrined as the foundation and fundamental principle of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), recognized and promoted by Xi

himself.¹ Within the state, the authority of foreign policy decision-making remains nominally divided among the legislature (the National People’s Congress), the government (the State Council), and the party (the CCP). But because the Chinese Communist Party penetrates and dominates all realms of the government structure, including legislative and executive, it plays an overarching and dominant role in the decision-making process. The top leader, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party consequently holds paramount authority over the decision-making. This is particularly true under General Secretary Xi, whose consolidation of power created control over critical affairs unparalleled by both of his predecessors.

By virtue of the party’s organizational structure, Chinese policy issues including foreign and security policies could mandate broader participation and approval from the Politburo Standing Committee, Politburo, or even the Central Committee. For day-to-day operations, the Politburo Standing Committee, which is the most senior among all three tiers, enjoys paramount authority and the operational convenience to meet regularly—and as needed—to determine foreign affair issues. With all its members based in Beijing, the Politburo Standing Committee meets at least once weekly.² Special meetings dedicated to foreign policy issues could also be organized in the event of an emergency, usually organized by the coordinating agency, the FAO of the Central Committee, also the executive office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission.³

Before Xi, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party was regarded as “first among equals.” All members of the Politburo Standing Committee enjoyed the same bureaucratic ranking at the national level and the same title as “leaders of the nation and the party.” Particularly under Hu Jintao, each member had a designated area of responsibility.⁴ However, the issues of foreign policy and national security have strictly fallen under the purview of the General Secretary.⁵ A key factor in this setup that designates the General Secretary as the “person in charge” is that the members of Politburo Standing Committee are, first and foremost, domestic generalists and there has not been any member of the Politburo Standing Committee who rose from a foreign policy background. While Standing Committee members all received some training and experience in foreign affairs during their bureaucratic career, the General Secretary enjoys most exposure, training, and bureaucratic support to lead foreign and security policies. As such, the General Secretary is tasked with the management of routine, daily, and regular foreign and security policy issues until there is a need to subject the policy to broader discussion within the Party, either at the level of the Politburo Standing Committee, the Politburo, the Central Committee, or an expanded meeting of the Central Committee.

In this decision-making process, the General Secretary is assisted by his key advisors. In foreign affairs, the top advisor is a Politburo member, Director of the Foreign Affairs Office Yang Jiechi. And in national security affairs, he is advised by the executive director of the office of the National Security Commission, Ding Xuexiang. The policy process begins with agency reports, inputs, and

¹ “习近平：贯彻执行民主集中制是全党的共同政治责任” [Xi Jinping: Implementing democratic centralism is the common political responsibility of the whole party], *Communist Party Member Net*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.12371.cn/2018/12/27/ART11545899544693133.shtml>.

² Richard Bush, “The Perils of Proximity: China-Japan Security Relations,” *Brookings*, 2011, p. 125.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Michael D. Swaine, “China’s Assertive Behavior, Part Three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy,” *China Leadership Monitor* 36, 2011, p. 3, <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/clm36ms.pdf>.

⁵ Qingmin Zhang and Bing Liu, “首脑出访与中国外交” [Heads of State’s Visits and China’s Diplomacy], *International Political Studies* 2 (2018), <https://www.sis.pku.edu.cn/teachers/docs/20190904131329069125.pdf>.

recommendations on a specific policy issue, which are submitted to the Foreign Affairs Office (FAO) or National Security Commission (NSC) for adjudication. The FAO and National Security Commission are also mandated to perform policy consultation and deliberation among participating agencies in order to formulate comprehensive findings and policy recommendations to be presented to the top leader. The executive directors of the FAO and NSC also enjoy large authority in deciding less important, procedural, and operational issues that do not require top-level intervention or adjudication. As described by bureaucratic insiders back in 2011, when State Councilor Dai Bingguo was the head of the FAO: “most of the procedural (national security) issues are taken care of within the ministries. For those that reach the State-Councilor level, he and the FAO have a large authority to make decisions. Only those that Dai could not decide with certainty will be brought to Hu Jintao. And only those that Hu could not decide alone will be pushed to Politburo Standing Committee.”⁶

Within the Chinese decision-making system, the more important the policy issue is, the broader support the Party and the top leader will seek to maximize diverse policy inputs, build consensus, demonstrate the popular support of a specific policy, and legitimize the final decision. Following the bureaucratic ladder, daily affairs are managed by foreign policy agencies, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Urgent matters and critical issues must be approved by the FAO. It used to be the case that introduction of new key policies would not only have to be decided by the top leader but also gain support from the Politburo Standing Committee, the Politburo, or even the whole Central Committee. However, under Xi Jinping, internal balancing of the top leader’s paramount authority appears seriously constrained. For example, there used to be a popular but simplified categorization of foreign and national security affairs into routine issues under the purview of the top leader and strategic issues under the purview of the Politburo Standing Committee.⁷ It’s simply difficult to imagine how the members of the Politburo Standing Committee would or could now challenge a decision made by the top leader himself.

The best example of the “collective decision-making” in a foreign policy issue was when former president Jiang Zemin convened two expanded meetings of the Politburo Standing Committee to decide whether China should change its policy toward the United States as a result of the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade.⁸ Participation in the expanded meetings was extended to include representatives of related government ministries, Party departments, and some retired senior officials. This expanded participation reflected the leader’s desire to hold the broadest possible discussion of the crisis and to formulate a widely acceptable decision based on consensus.

II. The Centralization of Power under Xi Jinping

Under Xi Jinping’s predecessors, China’s foreign policy decision-making followed a model of “collective leadership, democratic centralism, individual preparation and decisions made at meetings,”

⁶ Yun Sun, “Chinese National Security Decision-Making Processes and Challenges,” *Brookings*, May 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/chinese-national-security-decisionmaking-sun-paper.pdf>, p. 7.

⁷ Yun Sun, “Chinese National Security Decision-Making Processes and Challenges,” p. 6.

⁸ For a detailed review of the process, see section on “Policy-making during the Belgrade Bombing Crisis,” in Zhou Qi, “Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy Since the Early 1990s,” PhD dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, March 2008, pp. 345-364.

summarized by then-President Jiang Zemin at the 16th Party Congress in 1999.⁹ These guidelines determine that key issues should be discussed among members and decided by the majority and that information for the making of the decision should be prepared and distributed to facilitate the exchange of views prior to the meeting.¹⁰ The top leader still carried the most weight as he was the “first among equals” and the designated person in charge of foreign affairs. As such, his opinions and preferences are respected and honored by other leaders on the Politburo Standing Committee. However, the other members still had the liberty to dissent. In a few cases before 2012, the views of certain members of the Politburo Standing Committee prevailed, such as then-Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang’s endorsement that supported China National Petroleum Corporation’s investment in an unstable Sudan.¹¹

This model of decision-making, however, ended with President Xi’s ascension to power when he succeeded Hu Jintao as China’s president at the National People’s Congress on March 15, 2013. In the past nine years, Xi has established a new model of the foreign policy decision-making process that is focused on his sole authority. As summarized by Politburo member Yang Jiechi in a *People’s Daily* article on July 3, 2021, Xi personally decided all foreign strategies and actions since 2013.

*Xi Jinping has made the strategies and personally took actions, demonstrated clear Chinese characteristics, Chinese style and the Chinese manners, and achieved a series of historical and groundbreaking achievements... All these achievements were made possible by Xi Jinping’s personal commandship and actions, by the firm leadership of the Central Committee with Xi Jinping as the core, by the scientific guidance of Xi Jinping’s thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era and his foreign policy thoughts, and by the collective hard work by the whole Party, military, and peoples of all ethnicities across the country.*¹²

The power concentration by Xi Jinping in foreign policy is reflected in four areas: indoctrination with the promotion of Xi Jinping Foreign Policy Thoughts, bureaucratic setup, personnel arrangements, and flagship foreign policy projects. First, indoctrination is one of the most common and effective political tools to forge collective actions and eliminate dissenting views that do not conform to the prevailing philosophy. Through a campaign of theorization and promotion, Xi Jinping Foreign Policy Thoughts have become the one enshrined guiding theory of China’s foreign policy work. The Xi Jinping Foreign Policy Thoughts are summarized as a series of new concepts, positions, and initiatives that are rich in Chinese characteristics, reflect the spirit of the era and lead the progressive trend of mankind’s development.¹³ They are published in the *Selective Collection of Xi Jinping’s Elaboration on Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics* (《习近平关于中国特色大国外交论述摘编》) and

⁹ Zemin Jiang, “江泽民在纪念中国共产党成立78周年座谈会上的讲话” [Speech at the Symposium to Celebrate the 78th Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese Communist Party], *People’s Daily*, June 28, 1999, <http://www.peopledaily.com.cn/item/ldhd/Jiangzm/1999/jianghua/jh0007.html>.

¹⁰ Deyou Zhang and Tao Li, “关于领导责任制度建设的思考” [Reflection on the Construction of the Leadership Responsibility System], *Political Science Studies* 4, 2009, p. 20.

¹¹ “Patey Explores CNPC’s Involvement in Sudan and South Sudan,” *Central European University*, November 18, 2014, <https://www.ceu.edu/article/2014-11-18/patey-explores-cnpcs-involvement-sudan-and-south-sudan>.

¹² Yang Jiechi, “赓续百年辉煌 开创时代篇章 习近平外交思想指引 党的外事工作取得光辉成就” [Continuing a century of glory, creating a chapter of the era, guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, and making glorious achievements in the party’s foreign affairs work], *Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania*, July 8, 2021, http://mr.china-embassy.org/sgzyhd/202107/t20210708_9078522.htm.

¹³ *People’s Daily*, “深入学习习近平外交思想，努力开创中国特色大国外交新局面” [In-depth study of Xi Jinping’s diplomatic thought and strive to create a new situation of major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics], *CPC News*, January 5, 2020, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0106/c40531-31535409.html>.

Outline on the Study of Xi Jinping Foreign Policy Thoughts (《习近平外交思想学习纲要》). The two books are published by the two most important publishing houses in China: the People's Press and the Central Party Literature Press, respectively. And they are distributed across the foreign policy apparatus to ensure that all levels and cadres are united around Xi Jinping's designated foreign policy course. Study sessions of Xi Jinping Foreign Policy Thoughts are mandated at all government and related units to ensure knowledge saturation. All achievements in China's foreign policy since the 18th Party Congress are attributed to the wisdom and farsightedness of Xi Jinping Foreign Policy Thoughts. In the *Selective Collection of Xi Jinping's Elaboration on Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics* alone, 504 elaborations by Xi on foreign policy issues are included, covering everything from the Belt and Road Initiative to multilateral diplomacy. These elaborations serve as indoctrinated theoretical and ideological guidelines ensuring the full saturation of and collective loyalty to Xi Jinping's foreign policy.

Second, through the bureaucratic setup, Xi has strengthened the “centralized and united leadership” by the CCP's foreign policy work. Xi has emphasized on different occasions that “foreign policy is the reflection of the nation's will and, therefore, its authority must be controlled by the Central Committee of the Communist Party.”¹⁴ This requires all agencies and personnel to maintain the authority and centralized and united leadership of the Party. As the cornerstone of Xi's systematic reform of the foreign policy decision-making process, at the 3rd Plenary of the 19th Party Congress in 2018, the Communist Party renamed and restructured the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and formed the new Central Foreign Affairs Commission. The responsibility of the Commission is “the top-level design, overall strategizing, coordination, general promotion, and supervision over the implementation” of foreign affairs. The previous “Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group” by virtue of its name suggests collective leadership among a group of leaders. The renaming of it as a Commission reduces its leading role while emphasizing its role as an implementation, consultation, and coordination agency.

The centralization of foreign policy authority through the new Commission is reflected both horizontally and vertically within the Chinese bureaucracy. Horizontally and among different government agencies, the Commission is tasked with eliminating the competing agendas and approaches among different government agencies. The Commission is headed by Xi Jinping himself with Premier Li Keqiang as his deputy. However, its membership encompasses the Foreign Ministry, Defense Ministry, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Public Security, International Liaison Department, Department of Propaganda, Department of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan Affairs, Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, and State Council Information Office. The centralized leadership of the Commission is said to “increase the efficiency of the decision-making and ensure the smooth implementation of the decisions.”¹⁵ In terms of vertical setup, the Commission has increased the communications and coordination between the central and local governments in foreign affairs to ensure local governments of all levels will strictly follow the guidelines set by the top leadership.

Third, in terms of personnel, Xi has strengthened his control of China's foreign policy decision-making through key appointments, including Yang Jiechi as the chief foreign policy official and

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Yuanzhe Ren, “掀开中国外事体制机制改革的新篇章” [Open a new chapter in the reform of China's foreign affairs system and mechanisms], *Guangming Daily*, May 23, 2018, https://theory.gmw.cn/2018-05/23/content_28934523.htm.

Director of the FAO; Wang Yi as the primary foreign policy implementer and Minister of Foreign Affairs; Ding Xuexiang as chief of staff and Director of the General Affairs Office of the Central Committee; and He Lifeng as his top economic advisor, Director of the National Development and Reform Commission, and China's top economic policymaking leader of the Belt and Road Initiative. Both Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi are career foreign service bureaucrats. However, their longevity on Xi Jinping's close advisory team is ensured by their loyalty to Xi as the top leader and his foreign policy agenda. In comparison, Ding Xuexiang and He Lifeng are domestic generalists and in Xi's small circle of utmost trust. Both have overlapped with Xi in his career in Shanghai and Fujian, which aligns with Xi's preference to promote his former subordinates.

Yang Jiechi reached the age of 71 last year and is expected to retire. There is a high possibility that Wang Yi, currently at the age of 68, will stay on for another term and replace Yang in his role at the FAO. The current Executive Vice Foreign Minister—who is also the Deputy Director of the FAO—Le Yucheng is expected to fill Wang Yi's position at the Foreign Ministry. He Lifeng, aged 66, and Ding Xuexiang, aged 59, are relatively young. Both are expected to stay on after the 20th Party Congress.

Last but not least, Xi's centralization of power in foreign policy decision-making is reflected through the prioritization of his signature foreign policy campaign, the Belt and Road Initiative, in China's foreign policy work. The Belt and Road Initiative has been personally decided, planned, implemented, and promoted by Xi Jinping.¹⁶ Since its introduction in 2013, it has been regarded as the top priority of the Communist Party and, consequently, the whole government and nation. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi has been able to mobilize all corners of the state and society to focus on the implementation of his grand strategic vision. The Initiative has become the overarching theme of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping, an unavoidable topic that all agencies have to prioritize as a lack of enthusiasm in participation is seen as political disloyalty to Xi and the Communist Party. Through the Initiative, Xi successfully tied the whole foreign policy apparatus to his personal leadership and authority over Chinese foreign policy.

III. The Role of the National Security Commission

The most important institutional change that Xi Jinping has made in China's national security decision-making is the creation of the Central National Security Commission (NSC) before the end of 2013.¹⁷ Before Xi, the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and the National Security Leading Small Group were “the same organization with two different titles” (一个机构，两块牌子). The two agencies, as such, also shared the same membership.

The discussion of the national security decision-making is highly relevant for the discussion of the foreign policy decision-making in China. In China's narrative, the term “national security” encompasses both domestic/internal and foreign/external security and, therefore, has a much broader connotation. Foreign policy issues are regarded as critically pertinent to China's external security.

¹⁶ Bei An, Xiyao Xie, and Xin Wen, “习近平总书记谋划推动共建“一带一路”述评” [Commentary on General Secretary Xi Jinping's plan to promote the joint construction of the "Belt and Road"], *Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*, November 19, 2021, http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2021-11/19/content_4899103.htm.

¹⁷ Joel Wuthnow, “A New Chinese National Security Bureaucracy Emerges,” *Real Clear Defense*, November 29, 2021, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/11/29/a_new_chinese_national_security_bureaucracy_emerges_805476.html.

However, before Xi, the two concepts and two decision-making processes largely remained in one office. There are many overlapping aspects between China's national security policy and its foreign policy, as the latter also serves to protect China's national security interests. However, because national security also encompasses military security, national defense, economic security, and other non-traditional security challenges, the framework and coverage are broader than with foreign policy.

Xi Jinping's creation of the NSC practically peeled the national security portfolio, both internal and external, away from the purview of the previous Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, making it a standalone and independent institution sitting at the highest level (i.e. the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party) and serving the top leader. As mentioned previously, there is still a separate institution mandated to manage foreign affairs: the Central Foreign Affairs Commission. However, the NSC is regarded as more prominent and important than the Foreign Affairs Commission for a number of reasons.

First, the NSC is closely associated with Xi Jinping's new national security concept and the foundation of his national security setup. It serves as the institutional manifestation and the materialization of Xi's national security concept. Xi defines Chinese national security in more expansive terms than his predecessors. It is broad, encompassing eleven categories: political, territorial, military, economic, cultural, social, ecological, scientific and technological, informational, nuclear, and related to natural resources. The concept also combines internal and external security issues, presenting a far more complicated picture of interactive security threats as "domestic and external components... [that are] tightly connected."¹⁸

To Xi, regime security, or the preservation of the Chinese Communist Party's rule, is central to the stability and, therefore, security of the Chinese state. What this highlights is that all issues related to foreign policy (external security) or domestic security (internal security) are being viewed through the lens of defending and ensuring the survival and security of the Chinese Communist Party regime. Given the unparalleled importance of regime security for the Party and for Xi himself, the NSC is conferred with the unique importance of carrying that mission. Foreign affairs, in comparison, is important, but its role in regime security is indirect and secondary.

Second, the NSC is a new institution, and its authorities and roles have been under development since its inception. However, the assumption is that its power and authority are significant: "In full operation, it will reshape Beijing's national security decision-making process concerning the formulation of national security strategies, crisis management at home and abroad, coordination of national security policies and actions by Party/army/state agencies and institutional links with its foreign national security counterparts."¹⁹ The NSC also has subordinate offices permeating throughout the party structure; provinces, prefectures, municipalities, city districts, and counties now all have National Security Commissions within their party committees, forming a vertical system culminating in the Central National Security Commission.²⁰

¹⁸ Tai Ming Cheung, "The Rise of the Chinese National Security State Under Xi Jinping," *China Policy Institute*, December 15, 2016, <https://cpianalysis.org/2016/12/15/the-rise-of-the-chinese-national-security-state-under-xi-jinping/>.

¹⁹ You Ji, "China's National Security Commission: Theory, Evolution and Operations," *Journal of Contemporary China* 25:98, pp. 178-196, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1075717.

²⁰ Joel Wuthnow, "A New Chinese National Security Bureaucracy Emerges."

Third, because the NSC is an institution created by Xi himself, there is a special emphasis on its inception and ensuring its success because it is associated with Xi's credibility, leadership, and achievements. In comparison, the Foreign Affairs Commission is a continuation of the previous Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and had already been operational for decades.

The unique and unparalleled importance of the NSC is also reflected in its membership, which is far more expansive than the Foreign Affairs Commission.

	National Security Commission (as of 2017) ²¹	Foreign Affairs Commission ²²
Chair	Xi Jinping (President, General Secretary, Chair of the Central Military Commission)	Xi Jinping (President, General Secretary, Chair of the Central Military Commission)
Deputy Chair	Li Keqiang (Premier)	Li Keqiang (Premier)
Members	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Zhang Dejiang (Politburo Standing Committee Member, Chair of National People's Congress) 2. Wang Huning (Politburo Member, Director, Policy Study Office of Central Committee) 3. Liu Qibao (Politburo Member, Chief of Propaganda Department) 4. Sun Zhengcai (Politburo Member, Party Secretary of Chongqing) 5. Fan Changlong (Politburo Member, Deputy Chair, Central Military Commission) 6. Meng Jianzhu (Politburo Member, Secretary of Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission) 7. Hu Chunhua (Politburo Member, Party Secretary of Guangdong) 8. Li Zhanchu (Politburo Member, Director of General Affairs Office) 9. Guo Jinlong (Politburo Member, Party Secretary of Beijing) 10. Han Zheng (Politburo Member, Party Secretary of Shanghai) 11. Yang Jing (State Councilor, Secretary of Central Secretariat) 12. Guo Shengkun (State Councilor, Minister of Public Security) 13. Zhang Yesui (Party Secretary and Deputy Minister of Foreign Ministry) 14. Yang Jiechi (State Councilor, Director of FAO) 15. Zhou Xiaochuan (Chief, People's Bank of China) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wang Qishan (Vice President) 2. Yang Jiechi (Politburo Member) 3. Huang Shenming (Politburo Member, Chief of Propaganda Department) 4. Wang Yi (State Councilor, Foreign Minister) 5. Wei Fenghe, (Member of Central Military Commission, State Councilor, Defense Minister) 6. Zhao Kezhi (State Councilor, Minister of Public Security) 7. Song Tao (Chief, International Liaison Department) 8. Chen Wenqing (Minister of State Security) 9. Wang Wentao (Minister of Commerce) 10. Liu Jieyi (Director, Taiwan Affairs Office, State Council) 11. Xia Baolong (Director, Hongkong and Macao Affairs Office, State Council) 12. Xu Lin (Director, Information Office, State Council) 13. Pan Yue (Director, Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, State Council)

²¹ The Paper (澎湃新闻), "中央国家安全委员会成员首度亮相《新闻联播》" [Members of the Central National Security Committee make their debut on "News Network"], *Sohu*, February 17, 2017, <http://news.sohu.com/20170217/n481030722.shtml>.

²² "中央外事工作委员会领导层出炉"[Leadership of Central Foreign Affairs Commission revealed], *The Paper*, May 15, 2018, http://m.thepaper.cn/kuaibao_detail.jsp?contid=2131634&from=kuaibao.

	16. Fang Fenghui (Chief of Staff, Central Military Commission) 17. Zhang Yang (Chief, Political Department, Central Military Commission) 18. Zhao Keshi (Chief, Logistic Department, Central Military Commission) 19. Zhang Youxia (Chief, Equipment Development Department, Central Military Commission)	
Director of Executive Office	Li Zhanshu (2014-2017) Ding Xuexiang (2017-)	Yang Jiechi
Deputy Director of Executive Office	Cai Qi (2014-2016) ²³ Liu Haixing (2017-) ²⁴ Chen Wenqing (2018-)	Le Yucheng (Executive Vice Foreign Minister)

Based on the membership, the NSC evidently enjoys seniority and, hence, superiority to the Foreign Affairs Commission. Other than Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, the NSC has ten Politburo members, while the Foreign Affairs Commission has two. Taking into consideration the State Councilors, the NSC has a total of thirteen “leaders of the country and the Party,” while the Foreign Affairs Commission has six. The rest of the members of the two Commissions are all ministerial-level officials. The NSC’s seniority is also reflected in the bureaucratic ranking of the head of the executive office. Both Li Zhanshu and Ding Xuexiang head the Commission’s Executive Office as the Director of the General Affairs Office of the Central Committee. Although the General Affairs Office appears to be in the same rank as the FAO, in reality, its power and authority are much more significant because of its central status in the Party hierarchy.

Having established the seniority of the NSC in comparison to the Foreign Affairs Commission, the natural next question is why that should matter to the foreign policy decision-making if national security and foreign policy are strictly separated and segregated. That’s where things get tricky. Because of the expansive nature of the definition of national security under Xi Jinping, which covers both external and internal, the foreign policy issues with national security implications would naturally be considered under the purview of the NSC, even though the primary decision-making agency appears to be the Foreign Affairs Commission.

For example, the North Korean nuclear issue might appear to be a foreign policy issue primarily. However, its development, the sanctions regime that affects Chinese financial transactions and financial institutions, the potential dangers of nuclear radiation and refugee inflows across the border,

²³ Han Qin, “国安委副主任蔡奇确定出任北京市长” [Cai Qi, deputy director of the National Security Committee, confirmed as mayor of Beijing], *DW News*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.dwnews.com/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD/59778722/%E5%9B%BD%E5%AE%89%E5%A7%94%E5%89%AF%E4%B8%BB%E4%BB%BB%E8%94%A1%E5%A5%87%E7%A1%AE%E5%AE%9A%E5%87%BA%E4%BB%BB%E5%8C%97%E4%BA%AC%E5%B8%82%E9%95%BF>.

²⁴ “我校校友刘海星出任中央国安委办公室副主任” [Liu Haixing, an alumnus of our school, was appointed as the Deputy Director of the Office of the Central National Security Committee], *Beijing Foreign Studies University*, March 6, 2018, <https://xyh.bfsu.edu.cn/info/1077/1299.htm>.

and the escalation potential on the Korean Peninsula all inevitably make it a national security priority for Beijing. When the North Korean issue is being processed and determined by both the NSC and Foreign Affairs Commission, the one with the seniority is bound to prevail. Similarly, when the Xinjiang issue is considered both as a foreign policy issue in its relevance for Sino-US relations by the Foreign Affairs Commission and as an issue of domestic homeland security and ethnic affairs by the NSC, the former is bound to heed the decision made by the latter. This is because the Foreign Affairs Commission has no authority to decide or alter the ethnic policies determined by the NSC, and its role is restricted to the promotion and defense of such policies in international arenas. Foreign policy issues are derivative of domestic policy issues, and as the NSC focuses on domestic security and makes key decisions on external security issues in China's foreign policy, the Foreign Affairs Commission must assume a subordinate and supportive role to the NSC's decisions.

The direct and inevitable consequence of this setup is the “securitization” of foreign policy issues and decisions. The NSC is mandated to examine all issues, foreign or domestic, through the lens of security, which by default is binary and leaves little space for either ambiguity or, more importantly, compromise, which arguably is the essence of diplomacy. When the foreign policy posture of China regarding the Xinjiang Uyghur issue is put under the microscope and lens of national security, the foreign policy apparatus will be pushed to pursue a policy that maximizes domestic security and minimizes risks presented by foreign governments and audiences. Similarly, when the COVID-19 origin issue is seen as a regime security issue—as any acknowledgment or ambiguous position on China's role at the beginning of the global pandemic will be used to directly challenge the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party regime—the foreign policy apparatus has no option but to turn themselves into “wolf warriors” and fight the battle without budging an inch.

IV. Information for Decision-Making

Solid and comprehensive information forms the foundation for good national security decision-making. In China, the system of producing such information for the top leaders is extensive. It includes and goes beyond all line agencies involved in national security, as well as governmental and semi-governmental think tanks and academia. This has not changed significantly under Xi.

Within the governmental apparatus, line agencies are the primary source of daily informational input on national security affairs. Each line agency involved in national security and foreign affairs, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of State Security, and PLA, provides regular reports that reflect the work and concerns specific to that agency's focus. Information collection and analysis are part of these agencies' routine responsibility and are conducted through their internal chain of command. Using the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an example, its field offices (Chinese embassies) are its primary source of information on issues of bilateral relations. While each embassy's Political Affairs Office and Economic Affairs Office each has its own portfolio, the Office of Policy Studies is the center of strategic analysis on local politics, economics, and bilateral relations. Diplomatic cables send first-hand information back to Beijing, where they are reviewed and incorporated into the research report by their managing divisions. Depending on the significance of the issue, the report will then be routed through the deputy director of the relevant department (such as the Department of North American and Oceanian Affairs), the director of the department, the vice foreign minister in

charge of the department, and then the foreign minister himself²⁵; the more important the issue, the higher up the approval required. Upon the completion of the routing, important reports are submitted to the General Office of the Central Committee as information entered into the system.

Externally, the decision-making system also relies on governmental and semi-governmental think tanks for information on and analysis of national security affairs. These think tanks are affiliated with government agencies and act as additional research arms. For example, the China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) is under the leadership of the Ministry of State Security, and is “a major source for foreign policy studies that go directly to China’s top leaders.”²⁶ The China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) is a research arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; its experts write reports for and provide briefings to Ministry officials.²⁷ The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), affiliated directly with the State Council, conducts extensive international research.²⁸

Generally speaking, think tanks produce two types of internal reports for national security decision-making purposes: regular reports and commissioned reports. Regular reports represent a “bottom-up” information-flow pattern. For these reports, think tank researchers regularly follow one geographical or functional area and keep decision-makers updated on the latest developments in their area of expertise. Commissioned reports, on the other hand, represent a “top-down” approach. When the FAO or General Office decides that a particular issue needs more information and analysis than already provided by the line agencies, they summon research think tanks to submit studies to assist in decision-making.

Under Xi Jinping, there are two observable shifts to the think tank landscape in China. The first is that Xi has put significant emphasis on the creation and development of “high-end Chinese think tanks” supported by the government. By the end of 2020, two batches of a total of 29 think tanks have been selected into the group.²⁹ Other than information collection and analysis functions, these think tanks are also expected to play a PR role for China, i.e. “to tell the China story well and spread the Chinese voice effectively.”³⁰ With the booming of the think tank business in China, civilian think tanks that are not affiliated with any government agencies have also enjoyed much space to grow.

The second change is the tightening of the freedom of speech within the think tank community. As a channel of communication, think tank scholars used to enjoy more space and leeway in engaging foreign counterparts, embassies, and government officials in dialogues and conversations. But under Xi, the leash has been significantly tightened. This is primarily due to the government’s desire to “speak with one voice” instead of allowing think tank scholars to give assessments of China’s policy to

²⁵ The names of the officials to whom the reports are presented are listed later in this testimony. Each one has the authority to comment and request revisions to the report. The routing process can be extremely intricate and time-consuming. In one extreme case, a report was routed through 99 officials.

²⁶ Doak Barnett, “The Making of Foreign Policy in China: Structure and Process,” *Westview Press*, 1985, pp. 123-124.

²⁷ Bonnie Glaser and Philip Saunders, “Chinese Civilian Foreign Policy Research Institutes: Evolving Roles and Increasing Influence,” *The China Quarterly*, 2002, p. 599.

²⁸ “我院概况” [Introduction to CASS], CASS, accessed January 24, 2022, <http://www.cssn.cn/news/140195.htm>.

²⁹ Mengqi Wu, “国家高端智库建设试点单位共29家，复旦大学中国研究院是首批” [There are a total of 29 national high-end think tank construction pilot units, and the China Research Institute of Fudan University is the first batch], *China Institute, Fudan University*, December 29, 2020, <http://www.cifu.fudan.edu.cn/f7/d5/c412a260053/page.htm>.

³⁰ Li Zhou, “讲好中国故事，传播好中国声音” [Tell Chinese stories well and spread Chinese voices well], *China.org*, May 31, 2021, http://www.china.com.cn/opinion/think/2021-05/31/content_77538101.htm.

foreigners that do not always align with the government's official position. The implementation of this stringent control was made even easier by the COVID-19, with travel restrictions in and out of China in the name of disease control making field research, in-person communications, and face-to-face dialogues practically impossible. Virtual dialogues have become popular since the summer of 2020. However, Chinese scholars' participation is still subject to approval by their organization. This has had a major impact on the information available to and produced by Chinese think tanks on foreign policy issues. There may be a dearth of knowledge about China in the outside world due to COVID, but there is also an equally severe dearth of knowledge in China about the outside world.

V. The Institutional Origins of China's Assertive Foreign Policy

China's assertive foreign policy under Xi has been gaining momentum since he took power in 2013, starting with his hardline approach toward China's maritime disputes, especially in the South China Sea. From the perspective of the institutional setup for China's foreign policy decision-making, there are at least three factors that determined and/or contributed to China's foreign policy posture: the strategic personality of the top leader, the "securitization" of China's foreign policy issues, and the "bandwagon effect" within the bureaucracy and the society through the mobilization of nationalism and public opinion.

First, the centralization of power and authority by Xi Jinping means that China's foreign policy will be determined by his strategic personality and political beliefs.³¹ After Mao Zedong, who made China independent, and Deng Xiaoping, who made China rich, Xi Jinping sees his mandate as making China strong.³² That is the essence of the two popular slogans under his reign: "the China Dream" and "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Xi believes in power politics and is convinced that the time has come for China to reclaim its rightful place in the region and the world. As such, the previous mantra from the Deng Xiaoping era of "hide our strength and bide our time," which was observed by Xi's predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, has been abandoned and replaced by "actively seeking progress."³³ Through expanding China's sphere of influence through the Belt and Road Initiative and asserting China's claims in territorial and maritime disputes, China's foreign policy loyally follows Xi's vision for China's "great rejuvenation." And his unparalleled authority and elimination of dissenting views have ensured that his vision is pursued without dissenting views or challenges from within.

Second, Xi's power concentration and the indoctrination of his strategic visions also created the bandwagon effect within the bureaucratic polity. Within the bureaucracy, people who do not share Xi's vision, or do not belong to his close group of trusted advisors, are naturally marginalized in the decision-making circle. On the working level, officials and scholars who disagree with his foreign policy decisions will not receive the resources and support for their work or research. Through the mobilization of the bureaucratic system, the power, positions, and resources are directed towards

³¹ Jane Perlez, "Chinese Leader's One-Man Show Complicated Diplomacy," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/world/asia/china-us-xi-jinping-washington-kerry-lew.html>.

³² Li Chen, "从站起来、富起来到强起来的伟大飞跃" [Great leap from standing up, to getting rich, to becoming strong], *People's Daily*, June 24, 2021. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-06/24/c_1127593780.htm.

³³ Runtian You, "从韬光养晦到积极进取 中国过去五年外交战略大变" [From hiding our strength and biding our time to actively seeking progress- Changes to China's foreign strategy in the past five years], *Lianhe Zaobao*, October, 14, 2017, <https://beltandroad.zaobao.com/beltandroad/news/story20171014-802792>.

those who will ardently defend and advance Xi's foreign policy vision. In other words, the system screens and shuffles out the dissidents and those less enthusiastic. Those who remain in the system and those eager to climb the bureaucratic ladder are encouraged to vigorously pursue foreign policy actions that could help them stand out in catering to Xi's taste for assertive great power diplomacy.

This trend has become a deeply embedded and widely shared bureaucratic phenomenon and the fundamental origin of the “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy” the world has witnessed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. By March 2020, China was faced with global challenges on the origin of COVID and the responsibility Beijing had to carry for it. To Beijing, this is not only a matter of international reputation, but also a vital challenge to its domestic regime security. If China is held responsible for the origin of COVID, it inevitably undermines the governance—and hence legitimacy—of the Chinese Communist Party in front of the world and of the Chinese people. Therefore, during the whole year of 2020, China's top foreign policy priority was to ensure that China would not be held accountable for COVID, and Chinese diplomats were unleashed to criticize, condemn, and attack any foreign government or organizations that dared to raise that accusation. This is why the Foreign Ministry spokesperson would receive the authorization, and even encouragement, to accuse the US of spreading COVID in the city of Wuhan in the fall of 2019.³⁴ This is also why senior Chinese diplomats all over the world simply “bristle” at COVID blame.³⁵

The internal security emphasis of China's assertive foreign policy is both the cause and the result of the “securitization” of China's foreign policy decision-making process discussed in the previous section. The NSC holds the broad mandate over both internal and external security, and the institution enjoys senior bureaucratic ranking compared to the Foreign Affairs Commission. The natural result of this setup is that NSC's prioritization of internal security, especially regime security, prevails as the overarching guideline of foreign policy decision-making. Foreign policy issues, such as the origin of COVID, are first and foremost viewed through the lens of regime security, which leaves the foreign policy apparatus no choice but to push for the harshest policy course possible to defend the regime's bottom-line interest.

The “bandwagon effect” within the bureaucracy is consolidated and amplified through the mobilization of nationalism and hawkish domestic public opinion. Through the indoctrination of the people about China's rejuvenation and superiority, as well as the desirability and necessity of Xi Jinping's assertive great power diplomacy to achieve them, the Chinese public is increasingly convinced of China's entitlement to special status and of the deserved punishment of states that dare to challenge it. Wolf warrior diplomacy might have been criticized widely outside China. Yet internally, it is cheered and welcomed as a sign of strength rather than weakness. The hawkish public opinion, in turn, feeds into the government's decision-making, as it reinforces the top leader's belief that he is fulfilling the view and aspiration of the Chinese people—the perceived source of his authority and legitimacy.

³⁴ Joyce Huang, “Chinese diplomat accuses US of speaking coronavirus,” *Voice of America*, March 13, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/science-health_coronavirus-outbreak_chinese-diplomat-accuses-us-spreading-coronavirus/6185768.html.

³⁵ Gideon Rachman, “China's wolf warriors bristle at COVID blame,” *Financial Times*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/b8042e0a-5e57-4340-8664-9702b9f3640f>.

The current course of China's assertive foreign policy is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. President Xi, his strategic personality, and his foreign policy vision are the fundamental origin of China's foreign policy behavior today. One could argue that China's expanding footprint and influence globally is the reflection of its growing national power. However, the way that the expansion is carried out and the assertiveness and coerciveness manifested are the direct result of Xi's political beliefs and the system he has designed to enforce his vision. His power concentration and unparalleled authority are what make it possible for his visions and policies to be loyally implemented by the bureaucracy. The decision-making process is designed institutionally and systematically in a way that ensures the internal security focus of China's foreign policy. The bureaucratic inertia, organizational culture, and the mobilized public opinion are supplemental factors that make the current course difficult to be reversed or revised.

In 2022, Xi's priority is to ensure a smooth 20th Party Congress and a smooth extension of his reign into the third term against the Party's tradition since Deng. This requires stability in China's foreign relations and external environment. But such self-restraint also needs to be qualified in both substance and its sustainability. In order to ensure the smooth transition to his third term, it is even more unlikely for Xi to adopt any conciliatory position in key contentious foreign policy issues because toughness rather than softness will boost his strong-man image and leadership authority. What this also means is that once the transition is completed and his power is consolidated, he will face even less baggage in the pursuit of a more assertive foreign policy course to advance what he believes to be his "mandate of heaven."³⁶

VI. Conclusion

China's foreign policy decision-making process has undergone significant changes institutionally and in terms of substance. The whole process is tailored to support the centralization of power and authority by the top leader and is thoroughly organized to fully support and loyally implement his view. The creation of the National Security Commission heavily imbued China's foreign policy decision-making with a prioritization of security, especially internal and regime security. As such, China's assertive foreign policy has at least three drivers: the leader's strategic personality and vision, the securitization of foreign policy, and the organizational bandwagon effect both within the bureaucracy and society.

The current course of foreign policy is unlikely to change under Xi's leadership, which is poised to continue for the next five to ten years, at the minimum. The year 2022 may witness some relative stabilization efforts by China in its foreign relations to ensure Xi's smooth transition to the third term. However, the assertive foreign policy course appears firmly set for the foreseeable future.

³⁶ George Thomas, "China's Xi Jinping's 'mandate of heaven' to rule the world," *CBN News*, October 26, 2021, <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2020/october/chinas-xi-jinpings-mandate-of-heaven-to-rule-the-world-nbsp>.