

CHAPTER 1

CCP DECISION-MAKING AND XI JINPING'S CENTRALIZATION OF AUTHORITY

Abstract

Over the past ten years, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping has undertaken a wide-ranging effort to restructure decision-making processes within the Chinese Party-state that will continue to have effects at the 20th Party Congress and beyond. Xi has augmented his own authority and systematically centralized decision-making power across all policy areas, preserving and enhancing the CCP's capacity to dominate policy-making and expanding his own authority to drive China's policy agenda. This top-down approach aims to unify the government and the nation under the Party and deliver on Xi's aspirations of enhancing China's strength while avoiding what he perceives as the shortcomings of his predecessors' leadership. Nevertheless, Xi's centralization of decision-making power may reduce the adaptability of lower-level governments and encourage the CCP's reliance on policy approaches that are poorly suited to address China's structural challenges. Should these trends continue, challenges to the United States may include more unpredictable economic policy decision-making, a more assertive foreign policy agenda, and a more aggressive military posture.

Key Findings

- General Secretary Xi's decision-making power has increased dramatically over the past decade, to the point that CCP media have recast the previously negative term "decision by one authority" as a positive feature of China's system. Xi has also overhauled Party rules to give himself an outsized role in the overall governance of the CCP and of China. Xi will likely maintain his high level of control after the October 20th Party Congress and the spring 2023 National People's Congress.
- Under Xi's leadership, the CCP has restructured China's policymaking apparatus by taking decision-making functions away from government bodies and placing them into Party organs, such as leading small groups and commissions. This shift bolsters the CCP's oversight of policy formulation and implementation to ensure stricter adherence to the Party line and marks a departure from prior CCP leaders' more broadly consultative policy-making process.

- Policy decision-making is increasingly centralized and synonymous with Xi’s personal leadership, equating loyalty to the Party with loyalty to him. This trend improves policy coordination at the possible expense of policy flexibility, leading to campaign-style governance that effectively addresses short-term issues but limits CCP leaders’ ability to correct policy mistakes.
- Xi seeks to avoid the perceived errors of the Soviet Union and China’s reform-era leaders. He asserts that previously lax and weak governance by his immediate predecessors damaged the CCP’s reputation, cohesiveness, and national governance abilities.
- Xi is enhancing central control over economic decision-making in an effort to ensure the preservation of the regime. Xi justifies this centralization by claiming he and the Party are uniquely capable of steering China toward an increasingly ambitious and nationalistic set of modernization plans. These intentions fail to reconcile with the systemic ailments afflicting China’s economy, which Xi and the CCP have chosen to mask by replacing the previous metric of gross domestic product (GDP) maximization with a proliferating number of top-down mandates and increased central enforcement.
- Xi has restructured the foreign policy decision-making apparatus to facilitate a unified and centrally directed approach to addressing international threats and achieving national objectives. The conduct of Chinese diplomacy now reflects his preference for a more aggressive and confrontational style.
- Xi has restructured the military and paramilitary apparatus to increase centralization and vest more authority in his own hands. Decisions on the use of China’s military and paramilitary forces are subject to an increase in the personal discretion exercised by Xi.

Recommendations

The Commission recommends:

- Congress pass legislation creating a new Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) (to replace the Open Source Center closed in 2015) that will translate and maintain a publicly available collection of important open source material from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and other countries of strategic interest. This legislation should require existing FFRDCs to provide to this new entity a copy of all open source Chinese-language materials collected or used in any government-sponsored analytical or related projects on an ongoing basis.
- Congress direct the Office of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence to produce an unclassified directory of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) senior members and organizations, similar to the “Directory of PRC Military Personalities” produced and updated by the U.S. Department of Defense.
 - The directory should be updated on an annual basis and consist of an unclassified public report on the CCP, including the Party’s organizational structure (including organizations affil-

iated with the United Front Work Department) and profiles of leaders and organizations at least to the level that the CCP defines as “senior cadre.”

- The contents of each year’s directory should be retained in the form of an unclassified, publicly available, searchable database of CCP members and organizations.

Introduction

At the 20th National Congress of the CCP, scheduled to begin on October 16, 2022, roughly 2,300 CCP delegates will likely extend Xi’s leadership and endorse new candidates for positions within the Party.* This reshuffle will be followed shortly thereafter by the National People’s Congress (NPC) in early 2023 for turnover of the state leadership.¹ These major political events are occurring against the backdrop of Xi’s intense consolidation and assertion of power over the last decade. Xi’s likely priorities for the Party Congress are to continue strengthening his ability to exercise complete political control and ensure personal loyalty from all levels of the CCP. An evaluation of how Xi has changed decision-making processes in China’s political system helps to understand the outcome of the Party Congress and how the United States can prepare for it.

Xi is upending recent patterns of decision-making and policy formulation that emerged in the post-Mao era.² In response to the Party’s perceived weaknesses under prior leaders, Xi has sought to strengthen the mechanisms for the Party’s leadership over all organs of governance, neutralize threats to CCP authority, and equip the CCP with the governance tools it needs to achieve its objectives.³ Xi’s emphasis on protecting and promoting the CCP’s authority in governing China means the Party is expanding its role in decision-making across all policy areas. Furthermore, Xi’s style of leadership makes personal loyalty to him synonymous with loyalty to the Party. These dynamics mean Xi’s policy preferences have an outsized impact on decision-making, as national and local government bodies must implement policies that adhere to his agenda.

This section evaluates the CCP’s decision-making structure and policy formation process under Xi’s leadership. The section begins with an assessment of how and why the CCP’s decision-making norms have evolved under Xi’s leadership. It then reviews the specific features of CCP decision-making processes under Xi across economic, foreign, and security policy. The section draws on the Commission’s January 2022

*As of this Report’s writing, the CCP is expected to convene its 20th National Congress on October 16, 2022. These congresses are held once every five years. Delegates to the Congress elect the CCP Central Committee and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. The CCP Central Committee is a political body comprising China’s top political leadership (currently 204 members and 172 alternates). According to the CCP charter, the Central Committee is vested with the power to select the Politburo (a group of 25 people who oversee the CCP). Within the Chinese political system, the ultimate power resides with the Politburo Standing Committee (nominally elected by the Central Committee). The current Politburo Standing Committee has seven members, with Xi Jinping serving as the General Secretary of the CCP and China’s head of state. *Xinhua*, “The CCP Central Committee Politburo Meeting Suggests that the Party’s 20th National Congress Convene on October 16 in Beijing” (中共中央政治局会议建议党的二十大10月16日在北京召开), August 31, 2022. Translation; Susan Lawrence and Mari Lee, “China’s Political System in Charts: A Snapshot before the 20th Party Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, November 24, 2021, 2, 9, 11; State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *19th Party Congress Concludes in Beijing, Xi Jinping Presided over the Congress and Delivered an Important Speech* (中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会在京闭幕 习近平主持大会并发表重要讲话), October 24, 2017. Translation.

hearing on “CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress,” consultations with experts, and open source research and analysis.

The Evolution of CCP Decision-Making

As one of the CCP’s most revered revolutionary leaders and the founder of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong enjoyed a position of singular authority in China’s political system until his death in 1976.⁴ At the Zunyi Conference during the CCP’s Long March in January 1935, Mao for the first time overcame the intra-Party disputes that had placed an upper limit on his political control of the CCP to become the Party’s undisputed leader.⁵ With the founding of the PRC, Mao was in a position to play a decisive role in shaping the construction of China’s nascent governance institutions and guiding the country’s policy direction. He was known for his hands-on involvement in policy decision-making, particularly in the foreign policy and security realms where his personal diplomacy with foreign leaders largely set the course for China’s diplomatic relations.⁶ Mao did not always exercise his decision-making authority through the formal bureaucratic mechanisms of the Party-state, and he even stopped attending Politburo meetings after 1959.⁷ Despite his domestic position at the pinnacle of China’s Party-state, Mao possessed a profound distrust of institutions that led him to repeatedly circumvent both government and Party bureaucracies in favor of stirring up mass movements to accomplish his policy goals.⁸ His domination had destabilizing and deadly consequences, such as the economic disaster of the Great Leap Forward that led to millions of deaths by starvation and the ideological excess of the Cultural Revolution that persecuted China’s political elite.⁹ Although Mao established the leading role for the CCP in Chinese society, his leadership approach also sometimes threatened the CCP’s stability as a ruling organization.

CCP leaders in the post-Mao era, up through Hu Jintao’s tenure, made deliberate efforts to prevent the concentration of decision-making power in one top leader. Mao Zedong’s unassailable authority over the CCP and his dictatorial governance of China led to continued disastrous policies despite mounting evidence of their failure.¹⁰ To prevent leaders from exercising such outsized power and influence, successive CCP leaders in the post-Mao era gradually adopted a “collective leadership” model* to ensure the top leader consulted with an executive group of other leaders in the Politburo Standing Committee when making decisions.¹¹

Hu Jintao’s leadership of the CCP from 2002 to 2012 saw the peak of the collective leadership model.¹² A communique from the CCP’s 17th Party Congress, held in 2007, formally defined the model as “a system with a division of responsibilities among individual leaders in an effort to prevent arbitrary decision-making by a single top leader.”¹³ The CCP’s adoption of a collective leadership model instituted a consensus-based approach toward decision-making whereby the top leader builds consensus around his specific policy proposals.

* Deng Xiaoping first articulated the need for the CCP to adopt a collective leadership system, writing in 1980 that CCP leadership required radical reform to guard against the risk of overconcentration of power. Alice Miller, “What Would Deng Do?” *Hoover Institution*, February 14, 2017; Deng Xiaoping, “On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership,” 1980.

Achieving consensus can be difficult partly because members of the Politburo Standing Committee may owe their position to political allegiance to different constituencies, interest groups, and influential Party elders whose interests they informally represent.*¹⁴

Women in China's Leadership †

The emphasis on consensus building does not include the voice of women. Despite stated commitments to equal opportunity and fair representation by the CCP and the Chinese government,‡ women have limited representation and voice across the top echelons of China's political system.¹⁵ Historically, female representatives have rarely constituted more than 10 percent of the roughly 300-member CCP Central Committee.¹⁶ Only 6 women have ever served in the 25-member Politburo, half of whom were the wives of other top leaders.¹⁷ No woman has ever served on the Politburo Standing Committee or held any of the top three positions in China's political system: CCP general secretary, chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and state chairman.§¹⁸ Female representation in key government roles such as ministries and provincial governorships is also extremely low.¹⁹ The percentage of People's Liberation Army (PLA) servicemembers who are female is not publicly available, but a Chinese military newspaper estimated in 2015 that approximately 5 percent or fewer were women.²⁰ Currently, no women hold senior command or political commissar positions in the PLA.²¹

Informal rules and procedures have emerged alongside a shift to collective decision-making. These norms include mandatory retirement age and term limits for CCP Politburo members, cadre evaluation systems, and regional representation in the CCP Central Committee. Some analysts argue these norms have contributed to

*Difficulties in consensus building extend throughout the broader Party-state bureaucracy. A provincial Party secretary, for example, has the same bureaucratic rank in China's political system as the minister of a State Council-level ministry. The interests and policy preferences of one minister may correspond with or diverge from those of a broader array of other ministries and local governments, with central Party leaders serving as the ultimate arbiters of decision-making. As a result, decisions from the top are often interpreted in different ways by localities and ministries, creating a "fragmented authoritarianism" style of governance in China's political system. Kenneth Lieberthal, "Introduction: The 'Fragmented Authoritarianism' Model and Its Limitations," in Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton, eds., *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, 1992, 1–30; David Lampton, "A Plum for a Peach: Bargaining, Interest, and Bureaucratic Politics in China," in Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton, eds., *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, 1992, 33–58.

†For more, see Sierra Janik, Daniel Blaugher, and Jonathan Ray, "Women in China's Leadership," *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, March 30, 2022.

‡PRC law on the protection of women's rights states that "women shall enjoy equal rights with men in all aspects of political... life." China has also espoused a commitment to "strengthen[ing] the work of training and selecting women cadres" and instituted quotas for female representation in certain positions in the CCP. Valarie Tan, "Women Hold Up Half the Sky, but Men Rule the Party," *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, June 3, 2021; State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *Gender Equality and Women's Development in China* (中国性别平等与妇女发展状况), August 2005. Translation: People's Republic of China Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (中华人民共和国妇女权益保障法), 2005. Translation.

§The top leader of the state in the PRC is called the "state chairman" (国家主席). Beijing misleadingly translates this title as "president" for the English-speaking audience. The Chinese word for "president" (总统), which is used in the title of the president of the United States and other presidents in democratic countries, is not used in any of Xi's titles. *Xinhua*, "Xi Jinping Elected State Chairman, State Military Commission Chairman" (习近平当选国家主席、国家军委主席), March 14, 2013. Translation; Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, "Xi Jinping Elected Chinese President," March 14, 2013.

a more “institutionalized” political system in China.²² For example, expert on China’s elite politics Cheng Li argues that at least two loose factions* in the CCP leadership have created an “intraparty mechanism approximating a system of checks and balances in the CCP leadership,” with leaders of these two groupings alternating occupancy of top leadership positions.²³ Bruce Dickson, professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, adds that existing and retired leaders negotiated over future leadership appointments in order to maintain a factional balance of power.²⁴

In reality, any apparent norms or institutions in China’s political system are little more than flexible rules that do not constrain the top CCP leaders but are instead selectively mobilized by them to advance their interests.²⁵ For example, while analysts point to formal and informal retirement age rules and term limits as indicative of institutionalization of China’s political system,† top CCP leaders have manipulated these norms to protect their position. At the 15th Party Congress in 1997, then General Secretary Jiang Zemin imposed a mandatory retirement age on the CCP leadership, and all leaders aged 70 or older resigned.²⁶ This rule, issued in spite of the fact that then General Secretary Jiang himself was 71, forced Qiao Shi, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and disliked by Jiang, to retire.²⁷ Then General Secretary Jiang lowered the retirement age to 67 at the 16th Party Congress in 2002 to remove another political rival, Li Ruihuan.²⁸

While these norms have always been informal and abused at the margins by his immediate predecessors, General Secretary Xi has fully taken advantage of their informality to strengthen his control. He has proven more effective than Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao in preventing opposing factions from challenging his leadership, upsetting any prior trend toward factional balancing. Whereas the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee of the 17th Party Congress (2007–2012) featured four members of the Communist Youth League faction, the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee of the 19th Party Congress (2017–2022) featured only one (Premier Li Keqiang).²⁹

Xi’s Justification for Reasserting Party Control

Xi’s drive to reassert the CCP’s role in decision-making springs from what he perceived to be critical weaknesses in China’s governance capacity under his recent predecessors.³⁰ A document known as a “historical resolution”‡ that Xi directed in order to reinforce his

*Dr. Li categorizes these factions as an “elitist coalition” of leaders from the families of CCP revolutionaries (e.g., Jiang Zemin, Xi Jinping) and a “populist” faction of leaders who advanced their careers by way of the Communist Youth League and have oriented policy toward economic equality and regional development (Hu Jintao, Li Keqiang). The factional groups Dr. Li identifies are not exhaustive, with several other loose groupings of political networks also observable in China’s elite politics. Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership*, Brookings Institution Press, 2019, 251–256; Cheng Li, “A Biographical and Factional Analysis of the Post-2012 Politburo,” *China Leadership Monitor*, June 6, 2013.

†For example, analysts at MacroPolo observe that retirement rules, retained since 1997 and consistently enforced since 2002, have worked to usher in new political leadership every 5–10 years. Damien Ma and Joshua Henderson, “Age Rules: The Arrival of the Post-60s Generation in Chinese Politics,” *MacroPolo*, December 31, 2021.

‡A “historical resolution” is a high-level Party document that presents an official summary of CCP history. CCP leaders including Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping have used the production of a historical resolution to address important political issues of their time with bear-

own leadership ahead of the 20th Party Congress claims that “previously lax and weak governance” under his reform-era predecessors had damaged the CCP’s reputation, cohesiveness, and national governance abilities.³¹ First, the document assesses that a “lack of awareness” by the previous Party leadership had permitted “weak, ineffective, diluted, and marginalized efforts in implementation” of the Party’s major policies and “feigned compliance” from lower-level officials, jeopardizing the CCP’s ability to enact its desired policies.³² Second, it argues that previous failures to stringently govern Party organizations had fostered “a serious lack of political conviction” among Party members and officials as well as “a startling level of corruption” that damaged the Party’s public image and therefore threatened its authority.³³ In the economic sphere, the historical resolution argues that an “undue emphasis on the rate and scale of growth” since the beginning of “reform and opening up” had created “institutional and structural problems in China’s economy” that only a strong Party could address.³⁴ In military affairs, it assesses that weak Party control over the armed forces under recent leadership had endangered both the Party’s political security and China’s military effectiveness.³⁵ Finally, it argues that China needs to bolster its abilities to defend its national security and navigate an increasingly complex international environment.³⁶ The solution to all of these deficiencies, in Xi’s analysis, was strengthening Party leadership over the organs of governance.³⁷

Xi also justifies his own personal elevation as a means to strengthen the overall authority of China’s political leadership. Xuezhi Guo, professor and chair of the political science department at Guilford College, argues in his book *The Politics of the Core Leader in China* that having a clear paramount leader facilitates penetration of Party authority into society because the aura of unified leadership fosters greater willingness to acquiesce to Party directives.³⁸ It also allows the leader to imprint the force of his personality on important policies.³⁹ Party sources advance this argument by framing the expansion of Xi’s authority as beneficial for both Party unity and China’s overall future.† Chinese politics expert Alice Miller assesses

ing on their personal leadership and legacy. (For more on Xi’s historical resolution, see Chapter 3, Section 1: “Year in Review: Security and Foreign Affairs.”) Bert Hofman, “China’s Third Historical Resolution: A Preview,” *National University of Singapore East Asian Institute*, November 16, 2021, 1; David Bandurski, “Deciding History, Sealing the Future,” *China Media Project*, November 8, 2021.

* Deepening the integration of the CCP into China’s administrative state bureaucracy aims to overcome internal tensions in this domestic development agenda, such as the need to break through vested interests and manage politically contentious redistributions of resources across regions, income groups, and powerful sectors. Neil Thomas, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 6; Neil Thomas, “Party All the Time: Xi Jinping’s Governance Reform Agenda after the Fourth Plenum,” *MacroPolo*, November 14, 2019; Nis Grunberg and Katja Drinhausen, “The Party Leads on Everything,” *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, September 24, 2019.

† A 2016 *People’s Daily* editorial justifying Xi’s political elevation asserted, “In order for a large country and large party such as [China’s] to cohere the entire party, unite the whole people, [and] triumph over challenges . . . the CCP Central Committee and the whole Party must have a core.” It further describes Xi’s adoption of this role as necessary for maintaining the authority of the CCP Central Committee, the unified leadership of the Party, and China’s overall long-term stability. An authoritative article released by a media platform affiliated with the CCP’s Central Political-Legal Affairs Commission in March 2022 argues that “only a political party that has a strong core can have formidable power” and supports this statement with quotations from Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping. It then credits Xi, serving as the core of the Party, with enabling China to overcome serious challenges, both domestic and international. Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission Chang’an Daulun, [*Chang’an Introduction*] Zhong Zhengsheng:

that prior to Xi's rise in 2012, the CCP elite may have groomed him for the precise purpose of Party institution building and shoring up governance capacity.*⁴⁰ In his testimony before the Commission, Neil Thomas, analyst for China and Northeast Asia at consultancy Eurasia Group, similarly argued that a perception existed among CCP elites that Hu Jintao's weak leadership had endangered Party authority and may have given Xi an "elite mandate" to restore the Party's authority, which he has also used to consolidate his own power dramatically.⁴¹

Xi's Lessons from the Fall of the Soviet Union

Xi's emphasis on reasserting Party control likely also reflects a desire to prevent the CCP from repeating mistakes he believes contributed to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's (CPSU) fall from power and the ensuing collapse of the Soviet Union itself. While Xi is not the first CCP leader to emphasize learning lessons from the fall of the Soviet Union, his conclusions about which lessons to draw differ in some areas from those of his predecessors.⁴²

A series of high-profile CCP propaganda documentaries on the topic produced in 2006, 2013, and 2022 illustrate this difference. Although all three documentaries emphasize the dangers of corruption, media liberalization, and hostile influences from outside powers, the 2006 documentary also includes a critique against overconcentration of power that is noticeably absent from the two films produced under Xi.[†]⁴³ It criticizes the CPSU for repeatedly allowing the top leader too much discretion to make decisions without consulting others.[‡]⁴⁴ The 2013 and 2022 documentaries produced under Xi do not share this assessment and instead place a pronounced emphasis on maintaining the authority of the Party's top leader.⁴⁵

According to Xi's remarks and propaganda aimed at the Party bureaucracy under his leadership, the most important factors behind the Soviet collapse include ideological competition and

Deeply Understand the Decisive Significance of the Two Establishes from Four Major Dimensions (【长安导论】钟政声：从四大维度深刻领悟“两个确立”的决定性意义), March 14, 2022. Translation; *Xinhua*, "People's Daily Editorial: Unswerving Promote Comprehensive and Strict Governance of the Party" (人民日报社论：坚定不移推进全面从严治党), October 27, 2016. Translation.

*Alice Miller observes that then General Secretary Hu Jintao's work report to the 18th Party Congress in November 2012 called for several specific initiatives that explicitly emerged under General Secretary Xi's leadership. These include upgrading the National Security Leading Small Group into a full-fledged commission and strengthening the role of Party organizations in non-public entities. Alice Miller, "Xi Jinping and the Evolution of Chinese Leadership Politics," in Thomas Fingar and Jean C. Oi, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Choices That Will Shape China's Future*, Stanford University Press, 2020, 35–39.

[†]According to research by David Shambaugh, a similar critique of the over-centralization of power was also visible in other Chinese assessments around and prior to this period. One of many themes common in works at the time was that Stalin introduced an over-concentration of power and a "dictatorship of the supreme leader" which led to a range of secondary problems throughout Soviet government and society. David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008, 62, 65–66.

[‡]The documentary accuses most of the Soviet leaders for violating the poorly defined principle of "democratic centralism." It criticizes Stalin for regularly "acting on his own will without consulting others" which led to a widespread problem of Party members "not speaking truth and currying favor[s]." Khrushchev and Brezhnev are similarly chastised for restricting decision-making power to only a small group of individuals and neglecting intra-Party oversight mechanisms. Gorbachev is accused of walking away from the principle of democratic centralism entirely through a unilateral decision to force democratization upon the Soviet Union. *ChinaScope*, "Eight-Episode TV Documentary Series: Preparing for Danger in Times of Safety, Episode Six."

Xi's Lessons from the Fall of the Soviet Union—Continued

confusion, loss of Party control over the historical narrative, decreasing effectiveness of the Party's organizational structure, and loss of Party control over the military.⁴⁶ Xi-era propaganda and both the 2013 and 2022 documentaries feature an excerpt from a speech he delivered to the newly selected 18th Central Committee in January 2013, two months after taking power:

Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the CPSU fall from power? An important reason is that competition in the ideological field was extremely intense; there was a complete negation of the Soviet Union's history [and] CPSU history, negating of Lenin, negating of Stalin, engaging in historical nihilism; ideology [was] confused, each level of Party organization had become almost useless, [and] the military was no longer under the leadership of the Party... This is a lesson from the past!⁴⁷

The changes Xi has wrought on China's governance system align closely with this diagnosis of the CPSU's failures, suggesting his agenda is informed in part by a desire to arrest these trends in China's own governance.⁴⁸

Features of CCP Decision-Making in the Xi Era

The CCP's decision-making under General Secretary Xi has broken away from the models of collective and consensus-based decision-making developed over time during Deng, Jiang, and Hu's periods of rule. Xi has reversed these emerging governance norms, overseeing an absorption of government functions once under the State Council into the CCP and elevating his personal leadership in a manner not seen since Mao Zedong. He also emphasizes a broad conception of national security in all policy areas so that the Party can address anything the leadership judges to be a threat. Xi's sweeping anticorruption campaign complements these efforts by removing potential rivals, shoring up Party discipline, and incentivizing loyalty to his leadership.

Expanded CCP Decision-Making Power

Xi is restructuring China's policymaking apparatus to grant greater decision-making authority to central Party bodies across policy areas, including in some areas previously delegated to the State Council and other government bodies.⁴⁹ Xi's elevation of "top-level design"* is emblematic of his push to increase the Party's control over policy formulation and implementation in China's broader national development.⁵⁰ Top-level design is intended to ensure more

*The phrase "top-level design" predates General Secretary Xi's rule over the CCP. According to Alex He, senior fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, the phrase was first introduced in recommendations prepared by the CCP Central Committee for the 12th Five-Year Plan in October 2010: "It is necessary to comprehensively move reform forward in every sector, with greater determination and courage; pay even more attention to a top-level design and an overall plan for reform; and clarify the priorities and sequences for reform." Alex He, "Top-Level Design for Supremacy: Economic Policy Making in China under President Xi," *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, May 2020, 3.

unified implementation of central policies throughout the system.⁵¹ By recentralizing policy formulation to Party-led organizations, top-level design seeks to overpower vested interests and bureaucratic resistance to Xi's agenda.⁵² For Xi, this recentralization is important because it enables him to overcome diverging interests of State Council Ministries* and local governments that may hinder their implementation of policy directives from the Party center.⁵³

To bring this top-level design to fruition, Xi has increased the number and bureaucratic power of Party leadership groups on core policy topics. Between 2013 and 2018, Xi elevated the bureaucratic status of existing Party leading small groups† on national security, finance and economics, and foreign affairs by converting them into permanent commissions.⁵⁴ Compared to leading small groups, commissions are higher-ranking, more formalized bodies with more bureaucratic power to coordinate policy development.⁵⁵ Xi also established new Party groups on topics such as “comprehensively deepening reform,” “law-based governance,” cybersecurity, audits, and military-civil fusion, all of which were either founded as commissions or later elevated to that level.⁵⁶ While some of these commissions' offices are located within the offices of the CCP Central Committee, others have been physically placed within corresponding State Council ministries.⁵⁷ For example, in March 2018 the CCP established a new Central Commission on Comprehensively Governing the Country According to Law with its own permanent offices at the Ministry of Justice.⁵⁸

March 2018 marked a key milestone in Xi's efforts to centralize Party control. Following its Third Plenum in February 2018, the 19th Central Committee under Xi's leadership released a plan in March directing a broad reorganization of many elements of the Party-state bureaucracy.⁵⁹ This included the establishment and upgrading of six of the aforementioned Party commissions as well as several other measures that explicitly moved key functions from State Council bodies under new Party leadership (see Table 1).⁶⁰ The reorganization plan published jointly by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council emphasized the importance of furthering integration between Party and state offices.⁶¹ It also explained that the changes aimed to improve the CCP's ability to “design policy.”⁶²

*The State Council is the cabinet of China's government and is the highest organ of day-to-day governance and administration. It is officially responsible for implementing policies formulated by the CCP. It is led by the premier and composed of 26 constituent departments and an array of other public institutions. Susan V. Lawrence and Mari Y. Lee, “China's Political System in Charts: A Snapshot before the 20th Party Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, November 24, 2021, 27, 30.

†The CCP has used leading small groups since at least the 1950s for a variety of oversight and decision-making purposes depending on the top leader's preferences. Under Mao Zedong, for example, the Party Central Committee formed a five-person and then a ten-person leading small group to guide the 1955 campaign to “suppress counterrevolutionaries.” As the Party moved to a collective leadership model with a consensus approach to decision-making, leading small groups gradually became more policy focused and led by different members of the Politburo Standing Committee. The CCP has also established task-oriented, short-term groups in response to policy crises. On January 25, 2020, the Central Committee established a new central leading group on pandemic response as CCP leaders finally publicly acknowledged the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. *Xinhua*, “Xi Focus: Chronicle of Xi's Leadership in China's War against Coronavirus,” September 7, 2020; Christopher K. Johnson and Scott Kennedy, “Xi's Signature Governance Innovation: The Rise of Leading Small Groups,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 17, 2017; Alice Miller, “More Already on the Central Committee's Leading Small Groups,” *China Leadership Monitor*, July 28, 2014, 3–4; Alice Miller, “The CCP Central Committee's Leading Small Groups,” *China Leadership Monitor*, September 2, 2008.

Table 1: March 2018 Reorganization of Select State Council Functions under CCP Leadership

Original State Council Body	Reorganization under the CCP
Ministry of Supervision	Absorbed by the National Supervisory Commission
Bureau of Corruption Prevention	Absorbed by the National Supervisory Commission
State Office for Public Sector Reform	Reorganized under the CCP Organization Department
Civil Service Department	Reorganized under the CCP Organization Department
National Academy of Governance	Merged with the Central Party School
State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television	Absorbed by the CCP Propaganda Department
State Ethnic Affairs Commission	Leadership transferred to the CCP United Front Work Department
State Administration for Religious Affairs	Reorganized under the CCP United Front Work Department
State Council Overseas Chinese Affairs Office	Reorganized under the CCP United Front Work Department

Source: Adapted from Nis Grunberg and Katja Drinhausen, “The Party Leads on Everything,” *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, September 24, 2019.

Anticorruption Campaign and Discipline Inspections as Tools of Governance

Upon assuming power in 2012, Xi launched a sweeping anticorruption campaign to both restore faith in the legitimacy of the CCP and remove political rivals.⁶³ The campaign has been notable in quickly reaching the upper echelons of the Party and military leadership. Purges of several high-level officials have included former Secretary of the Central Political-Legal Affairs Commission and member of the Politburo Standing Committee Zhou Yongkang and two former vice chairmen of the CMC, among others.⁶⁴ In targeting such officials, the campaign allowed Xi to increase his popular appeal by rooting out egregious corruption of China’s political elite.⁶⁵ It also enabled Xi to sideline rivals and instill fear of running afoul of his preferences throughout the Party’s upper and lower ranks.⁶⁶

The campaign and associated discipline inspections have been gradually institutionalized and now serve as tools to ensure adherence to Xi’s policy agenda across all levels of government. In late 2016, the CCP’s Central Committee launched pilot supervisory commissions in the Beijing municipality and Shanxi and Zhejiang provinces, leading to the establishment of a National Supervisory Commission that integrated the anticorruption functions of several government organizations.⁶⁷ This commission ultimately joined with the Party’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the CCP’s top disciplinary body, at the 2018 Two Sessions.⁶⁸ The new National Supervisory Commission formalized Xi’s anticorruption campaign and equipped the CCP with

Anticorruption Campaign and Discipline Inspections as Tools of Governance—*Continued*

oversight of China's wider government bureaucracy and public officials, including non-Party members that were formerly beyond the CCDI's jurisdiction.⁶⁹ These increased intragovernmental and intraparty coordination efforts have been complemented by changes to laws, regulations, and Party strictures to further formalize the campaign.⁷⁰ The anticorruption campaign's long-term persistence, expansion, and institutionalization provide increased evidence of its underlying political motivation and Xi's intention to use it as a multipurpose governing tool.⁷¹

As Xi's efforts to root out corruption and bolster Party discipline become more formalized, investigations are reaching down deeper into the Party's rank and file and becoming a means of governance. The number of corruption cases at or below the county level grew nearly 20 percent from 523,000 in 2017 to 624,000 in 2021.⁷² According to think tank MacroPolo's analysis of CCDI discipline inspections from 2019 to 2021, performance-related cases* made up 54 percent of cases investigated, compared with 46 percent for financial corruption, suggesting the CCP is attempting to shape cadre behavior to ensure they perform their duties.⁷³ These shifts toward larger numbers of investigations into lower-level cadres seem to point to an increased emphasis on ensuring broad-based responsiveness to the Party center.⁷⁴ There is also evidence that the ever-present threat of inspection has resulted in higher levels of risk aversion among local-level bureaucrats.†

Xi as the Core of CCP Decision-Making

Over the past decade, Xi has consolidated power and elevated his personal authority over the Party to an extent not seen since Mao Zedong.⁷⁵ First, Xi took control of the Party, state, and military more quickly than Jiang Zeming or Hu Jintao, becoming CCP general secretary and chairman of the CMC in November 2012 and state chairman in March 2013.‡ Then in 2016, only three years into Xi's

*The institutionalization of the National Supervision Commission within the CCDI is resulting in a more concerted effort to modify cadre behavior and ensure they implement the top CCP leadership's policy agenda. Since 2018, the CCDI has stressed the importance of "addressing bureaucratic inefficiency," with inspections now focusing on officials' failure to implement Party directives or the adoption of a lax work style, such as holding too many meetings and side-stepping administrative duties. Ruihan Huang and Joshua Henderson, "From Fear to Behavior Modification: Beijing Entrenches Corruption Fight," *MacroPolo*, March 8, 2022.

†In a study on the anticorruption campaign's impact on local-level governance, Erik H. Wang, assistant professor of political science at the Australian National University, found disciplinary inspections and anticorruption activities made local-level bureaucrats more risk averse. Dr. Wang used local government land auctions as an indicator of local bureaucrats' governance activity, as these auctions typically drive infrastructure development. According to Dr. Wang's findings, provincial disciplinary inspections were followed in the subsequent month by a 15 percent decline in land development projects proposed by bureaucrats in the inspected province. Erik H. Wang, "Frightened Mandarins: The Adverse Effects of Fighting Corruption on Local Bureaucracy," *Comparative Political Studies*, October 16, 2021, 1–2, 10, 25–26.

‡Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao each served a whole term as the top leader of the Party and the state before their predecessors (Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, respectively) ceded control of the military to them. Xi, by contrast, attained leadership of the Party, military, and state each at the first available opportunity. National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Elected Chinese President, Chairman of the PRC Central Military Commission," March 14, 2013; *Xinhua*, "Xi Jinping Appointed Chairman of the Central Military Commission" (习近平任中央军委军事委员会主席), November 15, 2012. Translation; *Xinhua*, "Xi Jinping -- General Secretary of

first term, the 18th CCP Central Committee formally declared him the “core” of the Party.⁷⁶ The designation of the “core” is reserved for particularly influential top leaders in CCP politics, and prior to Xi, only Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping had attained the title without it being directly bestowed upon them by the outgoing leader.*⁷⁷ At the end of Xi’s first term in power, his namesake political theory “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” was incorporated into the Party Charter and the Preamble of the PRC Constitution, respectively, further elevating him above his predecessors whose contributions to Party doctrine carry less political weight and drawing a parallel with Mao’s “Mao Zedong Thought.”†⁷⁸ In addition to formal political designations, Xi has accumulated informal titles deeply reminiscent of those last used to refer to Mao Zedong‡ that, to the domestic audience, carry a clear political message that places Xi on similar footing with Mao.⁷⁹ They also elevate him above his other predecessors, including Deng Xiaoping, who did not use any comparable honorifics.⁸⁰

the CPC Central Committee,” *People’s Daily Online*, November 15, 2012; James Mulvenon, “The King is Dead! Long Live the King! The CMC Leadership Transition from Jiang to Hu,” *China Leadership Monitor*, January 30, 2005.

* Jiang Zemin was declared the “core” on the authority of his powerful predecessor Deng Xiaoping, likely to promote stability amid the turbulent aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Hu Jintao was never granted the designation. Neil Thomas, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 2; Chris Buckley, “China’s Communist Party Declares Xi Jinping ‘Core’ Leader,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2016; Alice Miller, “‘Core’ Leaders, ‘Authoritative’ Persons, and Reform Pushback,” *China Leadership Monitor*, July 19, 2016, 1.

† Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” and Hu Jintao’s “Scientific Outlook on Development” do not bear their names and were not incorporated until after the conclusion of their terms as general secretary. Xi’s contribution is considered more politically significant because it includes his name and was formalized during his time in office. National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, *Explanation of the ‘Amendment to the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (Draft)’* (关于《中华人民共和国宪法修正案(草案)》的说明), March 20, 2018. Translation; *Reuters*, “China to Enshrine Xi’s Thought into State Constitution amid National ‘Fervor,’” January 19, 2018; 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, *Chinese Communist Party Charter* (中国共产党章程), October 24, 2017. Translation.

‡ Mao Zedong’s informal titles included the so-called “Four Greats,” namely “Great Teacher” (*weida de daoshi*), “Great Leader” (*weida de lingxiu*), “Great Helmsman” (*weida de duoshou*), and “Great Commander” (*weida de tongshuai*). Xi has thus far received titles reminiscent of the latter three, although without the adjective “great” associated. Over the course of Xi’s tenure, state and Party media, government websites, and officials have variously referred to him as “Leader” (*lingxiu*), “People’s Leader” (*renmin lingxiu*), “Pilot at the Helm” (*lingxiang zhangduo*), “Helmsman” (*zhangduozhe*), “Helmsman” (*duoshou*), and “Commander” (*tongshuai*). In the past, the *People’s Daily* has also referred to Stalin as “Great Leader” (*weida de lingxiu*), while both Stalin and Lenin have been called “Helmsman” (*duoshou*). Manoj Kewalramani, “‘People’s Leader’ Xi at Two Sessions - Paralympics Closing - Yang-Sullivan Meeting - He Yiting on Xi Thought & Two Establishments,” *Tracking People’s Daily*, March 14, 2022; *People’s Daily*, “General Secretary, Your Fellow Countrymen Long to See You!— Two Sessions Representative Committee Members Bring Regards to General Secretary from the People Everywhere” (总书记, 乡亲们非常想念您! ——两会代表委员带来各地人民对总书记的心意), March 10, 2022. Translation; *Qiushi*, “Read and Understand the Decisive Significance of the ‘Two Establishes’” (读懂“两个确立”的决定性意义), January 10, 2022. Translation; Qian Gang, “A Brief History of the Helmsmen,” *China Media Project*, November 2, 2020; *Xinhua*, “The Commander’s Deep Emotion and Concern— PLA and PAP Representatives Tell the Story of Chairman Xi Jinping’s Care for Grassroots Construction” (统帅的深情牵挂——解放军和武警部队代表讲述习近平主席关心基层建设的故事), May 25, 2020. Translation; *People’s Daily Online*, “People’s Daily Editorial: The Country’s Helmsman the People’s Leader” (人民日报社论: 国家的掌舵者 人民的领路人), March 17, 2018. Translation; *Xinhua*, “History’s Choice, the People’s Expectation— Commentary on the Management of State Affairs since the 18th Party Congress by the CCP Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the Core” (历史的选择, 人民的期待——党的十八大以来以习近平同志为核心的党中央治国理政评述), January 2, 2017. Translation; Chris Buckley, “China’s New ‘Helmsman’ Offers a Strident Nationalist Message,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2018; Nectar Gan, “Why China Is Reviving Mao’s Grandiose Title for Xi Jinping,” *South China Morning Post*, October 28, 2017; Javier C. Hernández, “China’s ‘Chairman of Everything’: Behind Xi Jinping’s Many Titles,” *New York Times*, October 25, 2017; Nectar Gan, “What Do You Call Xi Jinping? China’s Elite Echo Language of Mao to Sing the Praises of Their ‘Leader and Helmsman,’” *South China Morning Post*, October 22, 2017; Yan Changgui, “Who Put Forward the ‘Four Greats’” (“四个伟大”是谁提出来的), *People’s Daily*, August 18, 2006. Translation.

Xi's decision-making power has increased dramatically over this same period, to the point that CCP media have begun alluding to his expanding role in the CCP's decision-making by recasting the previously negative term "decision by one authority" as a positive feature of China's system.⁸¹ Most importantly, Xi has taken over the chairmanship of most of the CCP's powerful commissions and leading small groups, granting him a guiding role in defining goals for most major policy issues and expanding the remit of his decision-making power.⁸² Xi currently chairs nine Party commissions and leading small groups, all but one of which were either elevated in status or created during his tenure (see Table 2).⁸³ Hu Jintao, in comparison, chaired four.⁸⁴ The head of each commission's staff office handles daily administration for the commission and reports directly to Xi as the commission chairman.⁸⁵

Table 2: CCP Commissions and Leading Small Groups Chaired by Xi

Party Group Name	Establishment	Staff Office Head
Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission	Established in 2013 as a leading small group. Upgraded to a commission in 2018.	Jiang Jinqun
Central Finance and Economic Affairs Commission	Established in 1958 as a leading small group. Upgraded to a commission in 2018.	Liu He
Central Foreign Affairs Commission	Established in 1958 as a leading small group. Upgraded to a commission in 2018.	Yang Jiechi
Central National Security Commission	Established in 2000 as a leading small group. Upgraded to a commission in 2013.	Ding Xuexiang
Central Commission for Cybersecurity and Informationization	Established in 2014 as a leading small group. Upgraded to a commission in 2018.	Zhuang Rongwen
Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development	Established in 2017 as a commission.	Han Zheng
Central Commission on Comprehensively Governing the Country According to Law	Established in 2017 as a leading small group. Upgraded to a commission in 2018.	Guo Shengkun
Central Audit Commission	Established in 2018 as a commission.	Hou Kai
Central Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group	Established in 1954 as a leading small group.	Yang Jiechi

Source: Various.⁸⁶

Xi's elevated role is also reflected in other Party processes. For example, Xi has presided over the creation or amendment of significantly more Party rules and regulations than his predecessors.⁸⁷ In his testimony before the Commission, Mr. Thomas estimated that Xi is responsible for creating or editing about 70 percent of current central Party regulations, giving him an outsized impact on the overall governance of the CCP itself.*⁸⁸ In 2021 alone, Xi passed new CCP rules that increased central control over personnel selection, strengthened central supervision of high-level cadres, and elevated the general secretary's control over the agenda, convening, and operations of the Central Committee, Politburo, and Politburo Standing Committee.⁸⁹ Xi also has significant ability to control very high-level Party documents that carry great authority in China's ostensibly consensus-driven political system. According to Party media, Xi personally directed and supervised the document drafting group for the 19th Central Committee's Fourth Plenary Session in 2019 "from beginning to end" for more than 200 days.⁹⁰

Xi's expansion of his own authority alongside concurrent efforts to strengthen Party control blurs the line between the Party's authority and his own, creating conditions under which challenging him is tantamount to challenging the Party. Some experts argue that the leadership of the Party is now personified in the personal leadership of Xi.⁹¹ For example, Guoguang Wu, professor at the University of Victoria, Canada, remarks that the most striking feature of the 2019 Fourth Plenum Xi personally supervised is "the parity of the leadership of the party, of the party center, and of the party chief Xi Jinping."⁹² The line between Xi's authority and the Party's authority is also increasingly blurred in state media.⁹³ Mr. Thomas explains, "[Xi's] ideological control makes him virtually synonymous with Party rule ... rais[ing] the public cost for elites to move against him."⁹⁴ According to Minxin Pei, professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, rule changes under Xi have also "systematically enshrined Xi's personal authority and made support for and loyalty to Xi's authority a litmus test to determine discipline violations, job performance, and appointments and promotions of officials."⁹⁵ A condition to maintain Xi's status as the core and the center of the entire Party is now included in the CCP's Disciplinary and Penalty Code, Inspection and Work Code, CCP and Government Cadre Evaluation Code, and Cadre Appointment and Promotion Code.⁹⁶ Support for Xi even appears to be a criterion for participation in the upcoming 20th Party Congress.[†]⁹⁷

*Xi has also amassed the political power to alter more authoritative rules than his predecessors in a way that further entrenches his own power. For example, in 2016 Xi oversaw the revision of *Several Principles on Political Life in the Party*, one of the core documents developed under Deng Xiaoping to prevent the return of Mao-era strongman rule. The revised document notably decreased the emphasis on "collective leadership" and watered down prohibitions against the promotion of a personality cult. Minxin Pei, "Rewriting the Rules of the Chinese Party-State: Xi's Progress in Reinvigorating the CCP," *China Leadership Monitor*, June 1, 2019, 1–5.

†After the November 2021 Sixth Plenum, CCP media began emphasizing that delegates selected for the upcoming 20th Party Congress must "firmly uphold General Secretary Xi Jinping's core position in both the Party's Central Committee and the Party as a whole." Neil Thomas, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 11.

The “Two Safeguards” and the “Two Establishes”

Xi has used a pair of political formulations known as the “Two Safeguards” and “Two Establishes” to enshrine his status in official Party documents and to build a political defense for his personal leadership. In the runup to the 20th Party Congress, the two formulations have served as a vehicle for expressing obeisance to Xi in public statements by officials and organizations of the Party, government, and military at both central and provincial levels.⁹⁸

- The Two Safeguards, introduced in early 2018, stipulate that the CCP must “safeguard General Secretary Xi Jinping’s position as the core of the CCP Central Committee and the core of the whole Party” and “safeguard the CCP Central Committee’s authority and centralized, unified leadership.”⁹⁹ The Two Safeguards were incorporated into the CCP Regulations on Disciplinary Actions on August 26, 2018, making them a powerful tool for enforcing political loyalty to Xi.¹⁰⁰
- The Two Establishes build on the foundation of the Two Safeguards while taking steps toward greater personalization of power,* declaring that the Party has “established Comrade Xi Jinping’s status as the core of the CCP Central Committee and the core of the whole Party” and “established the guiding role of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.”¹⁰¹ Though first mentioned in 2018, the Two Establishes have been most heavily promoted since their incorporation into the 19th Central Committee’s Sixth Plenum Communiqué and Xi’s historical resolution in November 2021.¹⁰²

Emphasis on National Security in All Policy Areas

Xi has embedded a broad definition of “national security” into decision-making in nearly every policy area (see “Xi’s ‘Comprehensive National Security Concept’” below), which complements his emphasis on coordinated, centralized leadership.¹⁰³ Since 2014, the CCP claims to have made “security development a common thread in every domain of national development,” and the majority of Party and state organs now directly support some aspect of China’s so-called “national security work.”¹⁰⁴ As Timothy Heath, senior international defense researcher at RAND Corporation, explained in 2015, the adjustment means “anything [CCP] authorities deem an impediment to the realization of any of the country’s developmental objectives—regardless of whether it is economic, political or another category—may now be deemed a ‘security threat.’”¹⁰⁵

*While only one of the Two Safeguards mentions Xi by name, both of the Two Establishes concern him directly. Additionally, while the Two Safeguards refer to the leader by his current position as “General Secretary Xi Jinping,” the Two Establishes refer to him as “Comrade Xi Jinping,” thereby promoting him as an individual with authority independent of his particular position in the Party apparatus. *Qiushi*, “Read and Understand the Decisive Significance of the ‘Two Establishes’” (读懂“两个确立”的决定性意义), January 10, 2022. Translation; Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, “Two Safeguards” and “Four Consciousnesses” (“两个维护”和“四个意识”), August 27, 2018. Translation.

Xi's "Comprehensive National Security Concept"

Xi has introduced a so-called "Comprehensive National Security Concept"* that argues that threats to the CCP regime may originate from any field in the domestic or international arena and that these threats require coordinated, proactive efforts to manage. Its introduction in 2014 heralded a dramatic broadening and elevation of the concept of national security within China's policy framework.¹⁰⁶ As Sheena Chestnut Greitens, associate professor at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, testified before the Commission, the concept is primarily concerned with threats to the security of the CCP regime and political system.¹⁰⁷ According to official descriptions, it covers a wide and expanding range of policy areas within the definition of national security.¹⁰⁸ To date, this includes at least political security, military security, territorial security, economic security, cultural security, societal security, scientific security, internet security, environmental security, resource security, nuclear security, security of overseas interests, space security, deep sea security, polar security, and biological security.[†]¹⁰⁹ The concept considers both internal and external threats in each of these areas as well as the potential for the two types of threats to interact with and exacerbate one another.¹¹⁰ It further emphasizes the importance of proactive efforts to neutralize threats before they cause lasting damage.¹¹¹

To better coordinate the expansion of security responsibilities throughout the bureaucracy, Xi has strengthened central control by creating the Central National Security Commission (CNSC) and its associated hierarchy.¹¹² Xi presided over the creation of the CNSC in 2014 by elevating the previously ad hoc Central National Security Leading Small Group to the status of a permanent commission, thereby granting it a permanent staff office, a regular membership, and a position of greater influence within the bureaucracy.¹¹³ Since 2014, the CNSC has served as the CCP Central Committee's official "coordinating mechanism for decision-making and discussion" on the broad range of issues now deemed "national security" affairs and the institutional manifestation of Xi's Comprehensive National Security Concept.¹¹⁴ It functions as the highest decision-making body for integrated national security issues, merging the bureaucratic stove-

*The term is also sometimes translated "overall national security concept" or "holistic national security concept." Manoj Kewalramani, "Xi's Boao Forum Speech - 20th Party Congress Nominations - State Council on Agriculture & Energy Security - Xinjiang Secretary Ma Xingrui on National Security - Wang Yi's South Caucasus Diplomacy," *Tracking People's Daily*, April 21, 2022; Joel Wuthnow, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 2; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on U.S.-China Relations at the Chinese Communist Party's Centennial*, January 28, 2021, 1.

†Party sources often describe the relationship between various areas as: "the security of the people as the aim; political security as the fundamental principle; economic security as the foundation; military, cultural, and societal security as guarantees; and the promotion of international security as the source of support." Tang Aijun, "Ideological Security in the Framework of the Overall National Security Outlook" (总体国家安全观视域中的意识形态安全), *Socialism Studies*, December 12, 2019. Translation; *Xinhua*, "Xi Jinping: Persist in the Comprehensive National Security Concept, Walk the Road of National Security with Chinese Characteristics" (习近平: 坚持总体国家安全观 走中国特色国家安全道路), April 15, 2014. Translation.

pipes of national security work through its inclusion of top political, military, and economic leaders.*¹¹⁵ An official readout of the CNSC's first meeting states that the group exists "to establish a centralized, unified, efficient, and authoritative national security system; and to strengthen the leadership of national security work."¹¹⁶ This body is responsible to the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee and is chaired by Xi himself.¹¹⁷ A hierarchy of subordinate national security commissions have also been integrated into the Party structure at the provincial, prefectural, municipal, district, and county levels.¹¹⁸ These lower-level commissions take direction from above and are mainly tasked with implementation,† creating a system of supervision and coordination that extends from Xi in his role as CNSC chairman to the localities.¹¹⁹

Consequences for CCP Decision-Making in the Xi Era

The recentralization of the CCP's decision-making power under Xi streamlines policy coordination in China while undermining the flexibility of lower-level bodies and contributing to other policy challenges. Consequences arising from this recentralization include:

- *Centralized decision-making encourages further reliance on campaign-style governance, which is ill-suited to addressing longer-term, structural challenges:* As a Leninist party, the CCP is inherently mobilizational and often formulates and implements policy in a campaign-style manner.¹²⁰ Campaigns are appealing because in demanding rapid and clear results, they can overcome bureaucracy and give the impression of responsiveness to policy problems.¹²¹ By increasing the system's responsiveness to centralized directives, Xi's streamlining of the system increases the attractiveness of the mobilizational approach to policy formulation. Mr. Thomas testified that a mobilizational approach can yield results in policy areas with short-term, measurable, and easily defined goals, such as the improvement of air quality in China's industrial northeast.¹²² Campaign-style governance is less effective in resolving longer-term structural challenges such as China's economic slowdown, declining productivity, and high debt levels, which require careful balancing between dif-

*The group's broad membership reflects the requirements of the comprehensive national security concept's expansive and integrated nature. In 2017, the CNSC membership reportedly included Zhang Dejiang (Politburo Standing Committee Member, Chair of National People's Congress); Wang Huning (Politburo Member, Director, Policy Study Office of Central Committee); Liu Qibao (Politburo Member, Chief of Propaganda Department); Sun Zhengcai (Politburo Member, Party Secretary of Chongqing); Fan Changlong (Politburo Member, Deputy Chair, CMC); Meng Jianzhu (Politburo Member, Secretary of Central Political-Legal Affairs Commission); Hu Chunhua (Politburo Member, Party Secretary of Guangdong); Li Zhanzhu (Politburo Member, Director of General Affairs Office); Guo Jinlong (Politburo Member, Party Secretary of Beijing); Han Zheng (Politburo Member, Party Secretary of Shanghai); Yang Jing (State Councilor, Secretary of Central Secretariat); Guo Shengkun (State Councilor, Minister of Public Security); Zhang Yesui (Party Secretary and Deputy Minister of Foreign Ministry); Yang Jiechi (State Councilor, Director of the Foreign Affairs Office); Zhou Xiaochuan (Chief, People's Bank of China); Fang Fenghui (Chief of Staff, CMC); Zhang Yang (Chief, Political Department, CMC); Zhao Keshi (Chief, Logistic Department, CMC); and Zhang Youxia (Chief, Equipment Development Department, CMC). Yun Sun, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 8–9.

†Information from local Party and government sources suggests the lower-level commissions meet two to three times per year to review decisions from commissions at the higher levels, receive reports from other agencies, and discuss national security issues. Joel Wuthnow, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 2.

ferent stakeholders, including central and local government officials and state and nonstate businesses.¹²³

- *Centralized decision-making reduces flexibility in local-level governance, a historically important source of regime resilience:* In testimony before the Commission, Middlebury College associate professor of political science Jessica Teets explained that the previous encouragement and tolerance of local-level experimentation and adaptation of central-level policy directives enabled the CCP to maintain broad-based support for its rule.*¹²⁴ Local experimentation has also encouraged provinces to calibrate their tax and investment regulations to compete for investment from private and foreign firms.¹²⁵
- *Xi's centralization of political power and decision-making in the CCP and himself makes it difficult to correct policy mistakes:* As Xi has consolidated power within CCP bodies and himself, the Party's policy choices increasingly reflect his personal judgment with minimal if any checks from other parts of the Party-state bureaucracy.¹²⁶ Concentrating policy formulation and decision-making in leading small groups and commissions personally led by Xi means cadres also become fearful of adjusting and implementing policy in any manner that might run counter to the general secretary's pronouncements.¹²⁷

Economic Decision-Making

Like other domains, economic policymaking under General Secretary Xi has been characterized by increasing centralization. The economic domain is unique, however, in the degree to which decentralization and devolution of economic decisions had become core features of China's economy prior to Xi's ascension. In contrast to speculation at the beginning of his term that Xi might accentuate these trends as a market-oriented reformer, he has rather proven to be a reformer of a very different kind: a Leninist aiming to revive the Party's ability to more assertively penetrate and steer the economy, enact control over economic agents, and neutralize countervailing centers of economic power.[†]¹²⁸ Centralized economic decision-making under Xi aims to steer China's economy toward a new "high-quality" growth model, aiming to not only entrench and legitimize the CCP's position at home in the process but also buttress its

* Strict pollution standards, for example, might lead wealthier provinces to invest in clean energy technologies and poorer provinces to pare back pollutive manufacturing activity. Guangdong, a wealthy province along China's eastern seaboard, for example, pledged in its provincial 14th Five-Year Plan to "implement renewable energy replacement [of fossil energy]," invoking Xi's call from March 2021 to "establish a new type of power system with new energy as the mainstay." "New energy" in CCP policy pronouncement often refers to recently developed energy generation technologies such as wind and solar power as opposed to traditional fossil or hydrogeneration technologies. Jessica Teets, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 3; Edmund Downie and Jeremy Lee Wallace, "Gatekeepers of the Transition: How Provinces Are Adapting to China's National Decarbonization Pledges," *Columbia University Center on Global Energy Policy*, November 22, 2021.

† Leninism defines and characterizes the CCP's authoritarian organizational structure. Adopted originally from the Soviet Union, Leninism calls for a "vanguard" party organized along strict hierarchical lines not only to firmly dominate and control the government but also to penetrate and control society more broadly. For more, see Joseph Fewsmith, written testimony for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 1; Neil Harding, "Leninism," *Duke University Press*, 1996.

influence globally.*¹²⁹ To accomplish this, Xi is reviving, enhancing, and building new levers of central control over China's sprawling economy.

The Fragmentation of Economic Decision-Making Prior to the Xi Era

In the decades preceding Xi, decentralization and devolution of economic decision-making came to characterize China's political economy. "Fragmented authoritarianism" became a widely used term to describe the sprawling nature of China's economic bureaucracy, which consists of two vertical hierarchies, the Party (e.g., Party committees) and the state (e.g., ministries), intermeshed with territorial-level governments (e.g., mayors) and replicated at five levels: central, provincial, county, city, and township. Around the period of China's Reform and Opening, the prominence and discretion of local implementation increased sizably.† As Dr. Teets argued in testimony before the Commission, the great strength of this model was the adaptability it afforded an otherwise rigid authoritarian state. Local governments were able to compete, innovate, and move quickly to encourage GDP growth.¹³⁰

The problem CCP leaders perceived, however, was that their formal control over economic decision-making had eroded. Halting attempts to adjust the growth model under the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao Administration highlighted conflicts between the central government, local governments, and emerging corporate class.¹³¹ Inability to push forward central directives also revealed the relative decline of Party control mechanisms as well as rampant corruption and state capture by networks of regime insiders.¹³² Vested interest groups across various sectors (e.g., real estate, infrastructure, finance, and energy) and geographic areas developed centers of power challenging Beijing. Characterized by informal patronage and loyalty networks, these blocs proved capable of influencing national politics and stymying central government initiatives in favor of parochial interests.‡ While this collusion between local governments and business may have fostered China's rapid growth, it undermined the effectiveness of central governance, often requiring Beijing to bargain informally with influential interest groups in exchange for compliance with top-level decisions.¹³³ As vested interests undermined

*As Neil Thomas explained in testimony before the Commission, "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.'" Neil Thomas, written testimony for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 4.

†Some analysts and scholars identify the centralization versus decentralization paradigm as the perpetual source of both development and conflict in authoritarian systems, as a "continuous struggle" and "mutual interdependence" of a "despotic, universal state" contends with "a decentralized, particularistic aristocracy in actual possession of much of the power infrastructure of society." Mark Lupher, *Power Restructuring in China and Russia*, Westview Press, 1996, 10. As an example of this struggle within China, following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, China was originally governed via six greater administrative areas, all headed by powerful revolutionaries. However, this system was abolished quickly in the 1950s in favor of smaller provincial governance units, as Mao feared that large local power bases were a mounting challenge to central authority. Xiao Ma, *Localized Bargaining*, Oxford University Press, 2022, 194.

‡A recent insider-turned-defector's account of this process is captured in Desmond Shum's book *Red Roulette*, wherein the author demonstrates the informal networks of wealth and influence that proliferated in the Hu-Wen era involving intimate members of Premier Wen Jiabao's own family, high-ranking Party personnel, private businessmen, and a variety of other elites. In one chapter, Shum reveals that he, a non-Party member, was able to influence the promotion track of several cadres. Desmond Shum, *Red Roulette*, Simon & Schuster, September 7, 2021.

the Party internally, sources of wealth and influence outside the Party structure also rose precipitously, leading to the rapid relative decline in importance of the Party's formal control mechanisms.¹³⁴

Increasingly aware of their dwindling influence, CCP leaders came to view economic decentralization and fragmentation of authority as a threat to their rule. Thus, while many within and outside China saw liberalizing market-oriented reforms—moves that would have promoted transparency, increased bottom-up input and accountability, and decreased the role of regime insiders over the economy—as the solution to increasingly obvious systemic defects, CCP leaders opted instead for top-down reform, revivifying the Party's influence over the economy.

Power and Preservation Motivate Centralized Economic Decision-Making in the Xi Era

General Secretary Xi came into power with a mandate to preserve and recentralize the Party's authority, increase compliance with top-level economic directives throughout the Party-state bureaucracy, and crack down on vested interests.¹³⁵ At the highest levels, agreement was reached that reform from above via hierarchical, formal, Leninist Party structures was crucial to the Party's preservation. Xi's efforts are thus oriented around subjecting economic decision-makers to strict adherence to his "top-level design approach."¹³⁶ As Xi elaborated in a speech at the Fifth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee in October 2020, his "new development dynamic" is intended to "strengthen planning and design at the top level, and delegate detailed tasks to lower levels with priorities assigned."¹³⁷ Xi's approach is intended to counter the fragmented nature of the economic system that had arisen in the decades prior to his rule, in particular aiming to weaken centers of economic influence inside and outside the Party-state system that complicate or undermine his top-level direction. As Dr. Teets addressed in testimony before the Commission, this represents a decisive—though as of yet incomplete—move toward a new type of economic model wherein the center exerts greater control and the localities have far less autonomy.¹³⁸ Xi notes his intentions for consolidating and centralizing in his Fifth Plenum speech, arguing that his "new development dynamic must be built upon a unified national market, not on small and fragmented local markets."¹³⁹

In addition to Party preservation, Xi's drive to centralize control over the economy is motivated and justified in terms of engineering a comprehensive modernization drive to augment China's national power and global influence, particularly vis-à-vis the United States.*¹⁴⁰ The Party's evolving economic development ambitions

*In a speech given shortly after becoming general secretary in 2013, Xi outlined his guiding motivation: "we must concentrate our efforts on bettering our own affairs, continually broadening our comprehensive national power, improving the lives of our people, building a socialism that is superior to capitalism, and laying the foundation for a future where we will win the initiative and have the dominant position." In the third volume of *Governance of China*, Xi explains that a "well-founded system is the biggest strength a country has, and competition in terms of systems is the most essential rivalry between countries." Beijing's nationalist pursuit of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" is routinely framed as part of this broad competition of systems, particularly with the United States, and it is in turn used to justify the need for strengthening the Party and enhancing its position over and within the economy. For more, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 1, Section 1, "A Global Contest for Power and Influence: China's Views of Strategic Competition with the United States," in *2020 Annual Report*

are rhetorically and practically connected with the preservation of its domestic political position as well as its ability to exert global influence. Xi and his authorized propaganda regularly promote the idea that the Party is uniquely capable—informed by allegedly scientific assessments stemming from its Marxist analytic framework—of leading China and its economy to what he calls the “great rejuvenation.”¹⁴¹ Barry Naughton, China economist at the University of California at San Diego, succinctly captures Beijing’s evolving approach to its economy as a process of “grand steerage.”¹⁴² At the 19th Party Congress, Xi introduced a new and expedited timetable for bolstering China’s so-called “comprehensive national power” by way of having “basically achieved modernization” by 2035.¹⁴³ For Xi, achieving these expedited modernization goals simultaneously requires and justifies centralization, unity, and disciplined adherence to top-level economic directives. The CCP’s preservation and reinvigoration is thus, at least in Xi’s assessment, in a symbiotic relationship with his modernization goals and his ambitious vision for global leadership.

Xi’s confident pursuit and enunciation of his nationalistic modernization plans, however, coexist uneasily with the stark reality of an unbalanced economy that has experienced extended overreliance on unproductive debt. Misallocated resources have led total factor productivity growth (an economist’s primary measure of economic efficiency) to drop precipitously from an average of 3.5 percent in the 2000s to only 0.7 percent in the 2010s, at the same time total debt has ballooned.¹⁴⁴ It is increasingly evident to those inside and outside Beijing that a decisive economic slowdown is unavoidable and happening. These unwelcomed realities have only added urgency to Xi’s centralization drive as he seeks to make a virtue out of necessity: concentrating control to not only cut off local governments and vested interests from piling up debts in unproductive sectors but also steer resource allocation in centrally approved directions. As Beijing deepens a belated effort to cut off credit to old growth drivers, principally real estate construction activities, these moves have become embedded in a larger, politicized effort to shift China’s growth model from “quantity” to “quality,” wherein investment is channeled in accordance with a top-down definition of “quality” that conspicuously serves Xi’s modernization drive. Centralization and the revivification of top-down control mechanisms simultaneously aim to strengthen Xi’s capacity to guide this process and to ensure the regime’s preservation amid potential economic instability.

Politicized Economic Decision-Making Replaces GDP Growth Maximization

Faced with a drastic slowdown in China’s economy, the CCP has invoked Xi’s modernization agenda as a rationale for deemphasizing growth rates and elevating the importance of several other aspects of economic development, prominently including environmental health, concerns over inequality, and shifting the

to Congress, November 2020; Xi Jinping, “Uphold and Improve the Chinese Socialist System and Modernize State Governance,” *Governance of China*, Volume 3, October 31, 2019, 144; Tanner Greer, “Xi Jinping in Translation: China’s Guiding Ideology,” *Palladium*, May 31, 2019.

Politicized Economic Decision-Making Replaces GDP Growth Maximization—*Continued*

growth model to “high-quality” innovation-driven growth.* External observers initially expressed optimism that reducing a singular emphasis on growth would cut back on the negative externalities of China’s model. In practice, however, deemphasizing GDP growth as the lynchpin of economic decision-making has had the opposite effect, greatly increasing the politicization of economic decision-making as the CCP takes a top-down approach to determining what constitutes high-quality growth. Numerical targets often allowed officials and enterprises leeway to experiment in how they fulfilled state-directed objectives. GDP targets, however, have been replaced by a “confusing welter of political, social, and environmental mandates,” according to Andrew Batson, director for China research at economic research firm Gavekal. The shift has led officials and enterprises to adhere more closely to signals from Beijing than the market.¹⁴⁵ Rather than liberal market reform, Xi’s “grand project to reorient the Communist Party’s mobilizational machinery away from the pursuit of economic growth and toward a broader set of goals, which can be summarized as the pursuit of ‘national greatness’” is instead far more “consistent with Xi’s renewed focus on ideology and political discipline.”¹⁴⁶

The Structures of Economic Decision-Making under Xi

Xi is revivifying formal Leninist structures to discipline and control lower-level economic decision-making, enforce adherence to central directives, deepen the Party’s penetration into all aspects of the economy, and expand and deploy macroeconomic policy planning and guidance. Structures of economic decision-making under Xi can be segmented into two areas: (1) discipline, command, and control of the Party and state bureaucracies; and (2) increased penetration and efforts to steer the nonstate sector. Xi aims to overcome the structural challenge of exerting control over a sprawling economic system, enormous geographical expanse, and massive population by conditioning the bureaucracy, local officials, state-owned enterprises, and—increasingly—nonstate actors to faithfully enact his nationalist modernization plans. Xi’s address to the 19th Party Congress stressed the importance of developing the Party so the Party can guide the country and the economy toward modernization.¹⁴⁷ This belief will continue to animate Xi’s agenda at and beyond the 20th Party Congress.

*The 19th Party Congress was the locus of a major change in this direction, as Xi altered the CCP’s “principal contradiction” facing Chinese society away from Deng’s “ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social production” and to his own “unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life.” As Neil Thomas explained in his testimony, this change in the “principal contradiction” is an arcane but extremely important aspect of China’s governance. Neil Thomas, written testimony for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 5–6.

Reconsolidating the Control Center: The Party-State's Economic Bureaucracy

Whereas Mao Zedong was broadly “[d]istrustful of bureaucracy” and “sought means of administration which minimized the role of bureaucracy,” Xi seeks to rule through the bureaucracy, increasing its conditioning and adherence to central directives so that it may be harnessed and relied upon to faithfully steward his top-down economic program.¹⁴⁸

Centralizing Economic Decision-Making Power through Institutional Restructuring

The ability of central leaders to restructure both Party and state institutions is a major source of power.¹⁴⁹ Concentration of economic decision-making within Party commissions, and the expansion in resources and institutional capacity of these bodies, provides Xi greater leverage to penetrate and guide the state bureaucracies responsible for carrying out economic policy and ensure they are responsive to his top-level design.* By moving decision-making to these commissions, Xi has shifted the locus of economic decision-making out of the Politburo Standing Committee and to himself and his coterie of loyalists that run the economic commissions. Xi has also empowered Party organs he more directly controls to reclaim command over economic policymaking and implementation processes that had devolved to the State Council, enabling his influence over economic policy to far outpace that of Li Keqiang who, as premier of the State Council, would historically have had more power over economic matters.†¹⁵⁰

The two most important Party entities for economic policy-making in China, both upgraded from leading small groups to commissions in March 2018, are the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission and the Central Finance and Economic Affairs Commission.¹⁵¹ The former, although not principally focused on economics, is nonetheless the most important commission impacting economic policy. Nis Grünberg, lead analyst at the Mercator Institute for China Studies and an expert on China’s governance, called the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission the “powerhouse for Xi Jinping’s ‘top-level design’ policymaking, issuing policy on a broad array of topics, including economic issues.”¹⁵² The Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission outranks ministries and commands more political clout than China’s State

*Resources and personnel were syphoned away from functional ministries to staff these now expanded bodies, likely leading to “larger permanent staff and even their own office buildings.” Victor Shih, written testimony for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 2.

†Prior premiers, such as Zhu Rongji, have been given the latitude to oversee momentous economic policy programs, including banking system reorganization and state-owned enterprise reform. Beyond the structural changes, recent Party proceedings further point to the sidelining of the State Council and its leadership in matters of economic affairs. Li Keqiang was notably not referred to as “Premier” in the readout of the CCP’s 2021 Central Economic Work Conference, whereas he was in the 2020 readout. *Xinhua*, “The Central Economic Work Conference Was Held in Beijing, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang Delivered Important Speeches, Li Zhanshu, Wang Yang, Wang Huning, Zhao Leji, and Han Zheng All Attended the Meeting” (中央经济工作会议在北京举行习近平李克强作重要讲话 栗战书汪洋王沪宁赵乐际韩正出席会议), December 10, 2021. Translation; *Xinhua*, “Central Economic Work Conference Held in Beijing, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang Made Important Speeches, Li Zhanshu, Zhao Leji, Wang Yang, Wang Huning, and Han Zheng Attended the Meeting” (中央经济工作会议在北京举行 习近平李克强作重要讲话 栗战书汪洋王沪宁赵乐际韩正出席会议), December 18, 2020. Translation.

Council, which it uses “to steer and accelerate structural reforms under guidance by the central leadership,” and it includes but is not limited to economic policymaking areas such as “structural reforms in the financial sector, market regulation, and trade policy.”¹⁵³ The Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission formulates policies and hierarchically guides subordinate functional bodies such as the People’s Bank of China, the Ministry of Finance, the China Securities Regulatory Commission, China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology.*¹⁵⁴ The Central Finance and Economic Affairs Commission, as the second-most-important economic policymaking body, fulfills a similar role but with a more specialized remit focusing specifically on finance and economics, and it is “not as involved in the concrete policy formulation as the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission.”¹⁵⁵

The most noteworthy downgrading of state power at the expense of the Party’s recentralization of economic policymaking may be the de facto demotion of the National Development and Reform Commission (formerly the State Planning Commission)†, an entity of the state government once so powerful it was known as the “mini State Council.”¹⁵⁶ In the Hu-Wen era, the State Council guided China’s economic development, with the National Development and Reform Commission leading coordination of the national five-year planning process and making relevant policy decisions.¹⁵⁷ Under Xi, the Party-led commissions identified above have taken on more of these responsibilities at the same time as the 2018 restructuring removed key economic policymaking areas from the commission’s jurisdiction, further curtailing its influence.‡ The National Development and Reform Commission remains the leading state body for macroplanning and still conducts preliminary five-year planning research at the direction of the Politburo and the Central Committee, presenting them with initial policy proposals. The Party’s Central Finance and Economic Affairs Commission, however, now coordinates the drafting of the actual five-year plan and makes relevant decisions on its content.¹⁵⁹ Centralized economic decision-making power in Party bodies that are more pliant to Xi’s commands and increasingly resourced and empowered to steer China’s economic bureaucracy demonstrate Xi’s desire to ensure greater compliance with his top-level directives.

*In recent years, significant economic policies were made by the State Council, but they needed to be discussed and approved by the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee. In the late 1970s, during the transition away from Maoism, the CCP authorized the State Council to manage day-to-day administration of the country. Alex He, “The Emerging Model of Economic Policy Making under Xi Jinping: China’s Political Structure and Decision-making Process,” *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, December 2018, 11; Susan Lawrence and Mari Lee, “China’s Political System in Charts: A Snapshot before the 20th Party Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, November 24, 2021, 27.

†The State Planning Commission was first established in 1952 and charged with managing the central planned economy. In 1998, it was renamed the State Development Planning Commission, which in 2003 merged with the State Council Office for Restructuring the Economic System and part of the State Economic and Trade Commission to form the National Development and Reform Commission. Peter Martin, “The Humbling of the NDRC: China’s National Development and Reform Commission Searches for a New Role Amid Restructuring,” *China Brief*, March 6, 2014.

‡When Xi came to power in 2012, the National Development and Reform Commission was also “one of the first major bureaucracies to fall under Xi’s anticorruption radar. Dozens of [National Development and Reform Commission] officials were netted, including Deputy Director Liu Tienan, who managed the energy portfolio.” Neil Thomas, “Change of Plans: Making Market Capitalism Safe for China,” *MacroPolo*, December 30, 2018.

Increasing Supervision and Control of Local Experimentation beyond the 20th Party Congress

Despite Xi's centralization drive, economic policy implementation of top-level directives retains decentralized features. The reasons for this are structural, pragmatic, and strategic. Structurally, given China's geographic and population size, central leaders have little choice but to rely on local-level implementation of their plans. Pragmatically, central leaders continue to derive utility from local governments and officials figuring out what high-level directives such as "supply-side structural reform" should mean in practice. By passing responsibility to local levels, the central government puts the onus of resource expenditure on them while preserving its own resources. Further, the center can actively promote the specific implementation solutions that work well at the local level. Strategically, the central government is able to shift blame onto local governments whenever anything goes wrong. As Ran Ran and Yan Jian, scholars of Chinese politics, explain, "Upper level Chinese officials are inclined to deflect the blame downward to those at the lower levels who are in a less powerful position in the administrative system."¹⁶⁰ All of these factors enable Xi to take credit when things go right, blame others when things go wrong, and allow those below him to do the difficult work of trying to implement vague and contradictory top-level guidance.

Dr. Teets emphasized in testimony before the Commission, however, that policy experimentation in the Xi era is increasingly "supervised," with digital governance tools augmenting the center's ability to "directly monitor local compliance."¹⁶¹ This has led the governance structure to become "less fragmented between Party and State, and between the central and local levels of government, removing much of the previous policy discretion in the system."¹⁶² While reduced local discretion has benefits related to better implementation, less corruption, and more mobilization and standardization capacity, Xi's changes to governance have also led to confusion and frustration among cadres who face less clarity on promotion prospects, a sense of paralysis, and decreasing morale.¹⁶³ Centralization and bureaucratization remain ongoing processes and are far from complete, but the shift to this style of governance will increasingly endure "the same problems that all rigid bureaucracies do: less innovation to solve local problems, inadequacy of "one-size-fits-all policies," challenges of collecting enough information, and of regulating elite ambition within the system."¹⁶⁴ Nonetheless, Dr. Teets assesses that through the 20th Party Congress and beyond, "Xi Jinping's belief that the Party-state system was facing existential threats under the previous system makes any deviation from political centralization unlikely."^{* 165}

^{*} Optimistically, Dr. Teets forecasts that as "power accrues to the Party leadership and former veto players are pushed out of the system, we will observe policy reform in traditionally challenging areas, such as the urbanization-household registration nexus, advanced economic reform, and land reform. In the past, these reforms were not feasible because local or factional leaders opposed them, but now these changes may be made." Jessica Teets, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 4.

Placing, Promoting, and Rewarding Personnel in the Economic Domain: Xi's Network of Loyalists

Building and placing networks of loyalists in key domains is one of the most important aspects of control in the CCP's Leninist system. In the sprawling economic domain in particular, wherein numerous technical issue areas make it impossible for one individual to track everything at the center let alone at the localities, Xi relies on a coterie of loyalists to carry out his will. Xi leans heavily on the CCP's Central Organization Department, a powerful Party organ that directly monitors, evaluates, and controls promotions for thousands of positions throughout the Party system, thus making it an immensely important institution to Xi's plans for economic grand steering as well for the millions of cadres seeking promotion into positions of prominence.* The Organization Department's influence has only increased since 2018, when the State Administration of Civil Service, which formerly handled the appointment and assignment of state officials, was abolished and its functions absorbed into the Organization Department.¹⁶⁶ Xi has filled the Organization Department's leadership role, effectively his "chief personnel officer," with close associate Chen Xi, who was his roommate and close friend as a fellow "worker-peasant-soldier student" at Tsinghua University, when they both studied the same subject (chemical engineering) at the same time (1975–1979).¹⁶⁷ Control over the Organization Department allows Xi not only to promote loyalists to any position within the "leading cadre system," including the heads of the provincial organization departments, but also to embed his preferred economic promotion metrics into the evaluation criteria leading cadres compete to meet, mobilizing China's personnel apparatus to further his own politically informed economic development agenda.¹⁶⁸

Xi's loyalists are also perched atop the key "comprehensive" economic decision units, namely those that are more important than specific functional bureaucracies. Most important in this regard is Liu He, who handles the relevant economic issues at both the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission and the Central Finance and Economic Affairs Commission. Liu, as with Chen Xi, is a close associate from Xi's youth.¹⁶⁹ In the state bureaucracy, Xi also placed He Lifeng, one of his closest associates dating back to their time in Fujian in the 1980s, at the head of the National Development and Reform Commission.¹⁷⁰ He could become Xi's top economic advisor, according to reporting from the *Wall Street Journal*, taking over for Liu and overseeing day-to-day economic work at the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission and the Central Finance and Economic Affairs Commission.¹⁷¹ Liu is over the implicit retirement age and, if the implicit norm holds, would vacate these positions at the 20th Party Congress.¹⁷²

*The leading cadre system is estimated to contain over two million positions, with roughly 2,500 at the provincial/ministerial level. Cadre evaluation has also become substantially more centralized over time, with the Organization Department promulgating a variety of more specific metrics, the provinces more closely monitoring the counties, and the center more closely monitoring the provinces for compliance. Rui Qi, Chenchen Shi, and Mark Wang, "The Over-Cascading System of Cadre Evaluation and China's Authoritarian Resilience," *China Information* 35:1 (March 2021): 67–88; Han Chan and Jie Gao, "The Politics of Personnel Redundancy: The Non-Leading Cadre System in the Chinese Bureaucracy," *China Quarterly* 235 (2018): 627.

Controlling, Disciplining, and Punishing Personnel in the Economic Domain: Fear as a Tool

While placement and promotion incentives are a key lever Xi uses to induce compliance with his economic agenda, he has an equally potent counterpart in his arsenal: discipline and punishment. Christopher Carothers, postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Study of Contemporary China and an expert on Xi's anticorruption campaign, has documented the rise of inspections and their transition from "corruption control to everything control."¹⁷³ Dr. Carothers argues that the "Xi administration initially strengthened inspections to combat corruption but then repurposed them to serve as a top-down governance mechanism in numerous other areas as well," including implementation of Xi's economic development initiatives.¹⁷⁴ Investigations and inspections have become tools to coerce a geographically and functionally fragmented and decentralized bureaucracy and group of local elites into compliance with top-down economic decisions.¹⁷⁵ Dr. Carothers notes that these visits "produce a great deal of fear among bureaucrats and businesspeople," as inspectors' determinations, which are increasingly focused on substantively monitoring policy implementation, can have "swift and dramatic consequences."¹⁷⁶ As in other domains, Xi relies in particular on the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and the National Supervisory Commission—both of which are headed by Xi loyalists—to enforce implementation of central economic decisions.*¹⁷⁷

Xi's much-touted campaign to eliminate absolute poverty † in China is a prominent example of the involvement of these commissions in disciplining lower-level decision-makers and implementers. The National Supervisory Commission and CCDI worked at Xi's personal instruction to pressure and closely monitor Party and government officials to enact his campaign-style poverty reduction efforts, investigating and disciplining more than 99,000 people in 2019 for corruption related to poverty alleviation efforts.¹⁷⁸ More recently, investigations have been ongoing into leaders in areas related to China's flagging technological upgrading ambitions. Xiao Yaqing, responsible for overseeing industrial policy initiatives in semiconductors and other high-technology areas as the Minister of Industry and Information Technology, was removed from his post as minister in July 2022 and placed under investigation for a "violation of discipline and law," making him the highest-ranking official ensnared

*The head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, Zhao Leji, is considered one of Xi's two closest allies on the Politburo Standing Committee. The head of the National Supervisory Commission, Yang Xiaodu, served with Xi in Shanghai and was a deputy of Wang Qishan for several years prior to his appointment in March 2018. Neil Thomas, "Ties That Bind: Xi's People on the Politburo," *MacroPolo*, June 17, 2020; *US-China Business Council*, "National Supervisory Commission Director Yang Xiaodu"; Matt Ho, "Xi Jinping Aide, Yang Xiaodu, to Head China's Anti-Corruption 'Super Agency,'" *South China Morning Post*, March 18, 2018.

†When Xi declared victory over absolute poverty in 2021, China's standard for "absolute poverty" was roughly \$2.30 per day in 2011 dollars after adjusting for purchasing power parity. While this exceeded the World Bank's extreme poverty threshold of \$1.90 in 2011 dollars, economists have argued that the standard is nevertheless too low for a country with China's aggregate wealth. For more on limits of the metrics, methodology, and accuracy of the CCP's assertion of victory over absolute poverty, see Chapter 1, Section 1: "The Chinese Communist Party's Ambitions and Challenges at Its Centennial" in U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2021 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2021, 39; Maria Ana Lugo, Martin Raiser, and Ruslan Yemtsov, "What's Next for Poverty Reduction Policies in China?" *Brookings Institution*, September 24, 2021.

since 2018.¹⁷⁹ Between June and August 2022, the president and head of the National Integrated Circuit Industry Investment Fund, China's largest semiconductor government guidance fund, and four other top executives were put under investigation.¹⁸⁰ These investigations send a strong signal and warning to the rest of the bureaucracy and those charged with implementing Xi's technological upgrading ambitions that he is not pleased with the progress.

CCP Investigates Major Financial Institutions to Ensure Political Fealty

CCP leaders are increasing scrutiny of state financial regulators and major financial institutions to ensure adherence to the Party's top-level economic policy decisions. In October 2021, the CCP Central Committee announced it would undertake a series of disciplinary inspections into China's financial regulators, state-owned banks, and major financial institutions, with a statement from the CCDI describing the inspections as part of an effort to "strengthen the Party's leadership of financial work."¹⁸¹ The probe began as questions about China's high debt levels and inability to shift toward its "high-quality" growth model came into sharper relief for China's leaders: the 2021 CCDI investigation was notable for its inclusion of China's state-owned asset management companies, such as China Huarong.¹⁸² The firm's chairman, Lai Xiaomin, was executed following his conviction on bribery charges in January 2021.¹⁸³ Lai's execution was followed by Huarong missing a deadline to release its *2020 Annual Report* in April 2021, further rattling China's financial markets.*¹⁸⁴ Asset management companies were not scrutinized in a prior round of CCDI inspections into China's financial sector in 2015.†¹⁸⁵ Hugely indebted property developer Evergrande's missed bond payments in September and October 2021 likely also animated Party concerns about ties between nonstate companies and state-owned lenders.‡¹⁸⁶

*A host of other factors likely contributed to the Party's concerns about Huarong and its ability to dispose of nonperforming loans (NPLs). Huarong is one of the original four asset management companies established by the Chinese government in 1999 to take NPLs off the balance sheets of the country's state-owned banks amid the government's broader bailout of them at the time. Beginning in 2006, Huarong expanded into several other lines of noncore business, including banking, brokerage, and fund management services, as well as lending to property developers, thereby departing from its original mandate of helping state-owned banks dispose of NPLs and growing in systemic importance. Ling Huawei, "Ling Huawei: Huarong Can't Be Treated Like a Normal Company in Bankruptcy Restructuring," *Caixun*, April 12, 2021.

†The CCDI previously investigated China's financial sector in 2015 in the wake of a stock market rout and as part of the CCP's broader anticorruption campaign. In that investigation, the CCDI dispatched 15 inspection teams across 21 financial institutions (compared to 15 inspection teams across 25 financial institutions in 2021). Analysts assess the 2015 investigation was politically motivated, targeting patronage networks linked to specific political figures as Xi moved to consolidate power. It also targeted specific forms of market malfeasance, with probes into CITIC Securities General Manager Cheng Boming for insider trading and top officials at the then China Banking Regulatory Commission for corruption. *Reuters*, "Four China Banking Regulators Demoted as Anti-Corruption Crackdown on Financial Sector Continues," *South China Morning Post*, November 23, 2015; *People's Daily*, "Third Round of Central Inspections: Lineup Expanded to 15 Teams, First Appearance of 'One Supports Three'" (中央第三轮巡视进驻看点: 阵容扩至15组 首现“一托三”), November 3, 2015. Translation; *Xinhua*, "Central Inspection Storm Blows to the Financial System, 'One Bank, Three Commissions,' and Related Inspections" (中央巡视风暴刮向金融系统 “一行三会”等将体检), October 24, 2015. Translation; *Agence France-Presse*, "The World's Largest Sovereign Fund Is Being Scrutinized by China's Anti-Corruption Watchdog," *Insider*, October 24, 2015; Gabriel Wildau, "China's Anti-Corruption Probe Broadens into Finance Sector," *Financial Times*, February 3, 2015.

‡For more on Evergrande, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "In Focus: Evergrande Debt Crisis Forces Tough Choices," in *Economics and Trade Bulletin*, October

CCP Investigates Major Financial Institutions to Ensure Political Fealty—*Continued*

Particular scrutiny was applied to financial support of areas Xi no longer wants to see expand, such as in real estate (e.g., lending to Evergrande), as well as sensitive areas wherein Xi assesses that the rapid growth and influence of nonstate firms threatens the CCP's political control (e.g., fintech giant Ant Group and ride-sharing firm Didi Chuxing).¹⁸⁷ The CCP is particularly concerned that state regulators have become too close with large and influential nonstate firms.¹⁸⁸ In a preliminary review of their inspection work in February 2022, the CCDI warned financial regulators to be wary of problems arising from the “revolving door” of staff moving between regulatory agencies and commercial institutions.¹⁸⁹ The CCDI also called for improved efforts to prevent the “barbaric expansion of capital.”¹⁹⁰ Xi's use of investigations, discipline, and punishment aims to ensure political fealty and enforce stricter adherence to his developmental agenda.

Ideology in the Economic Domain: Xi Conditions Thought to Induce “Correct” Decisions

Xi's efforts to increasingly guide and control the economy through the bureaucracy suffer from what Xi and his Party propaganda organs routinely refer to as “formalism” and “bureaucratism.”¹⁹¹ These are forms of the principal-agent problem and refer to issues of lackadaisical implementation and the development of independent bureaucratic interests. Xi has warned China's leading officials that “formalism and bureaucratism kill people!”¹⁹² He has further denounced these two issues as existential threats to the Party, describing them as the most hated aspects and a core reason for the fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁹³ In contrast to Western critiques of “bureaucracy” that focused on structural issues, the CCP has routinely treated “bureaucratism” as stemming from wrong thought, moral failings, and weak ideological commitment.¹⁹⁴ As made clear in an edited volume of Xi's speeches against formalism and bureaucratism that cadres were made to study in 2020, formalism and bureaucratism result from an improper worldview and ideology as well as lack of “faith” and weak “ideals and convictions.”¹⁹⁵ Unlike Mao, who during the Cultural Revolution incited ideological fervor among the masses to attack Party and government structures and officials, Xi is seeking to use ideology to energize Party and government officials to faithfully and vigorously carry out his top-level guidance and engage in a permanent “self-revolution” to internalize his sanctioned approach to thinking, behaving, and ultimately making decisions.*¹⁹⁶

Ideologically molding official decision-making is a crucial cornerstone of Xi's approach to furthering his economic agenda, going well beyond simple reward and punishment and venturing into deeper

20, 2021, 8–12.

*“Self-revolution” is a common theme in Xi's speeches. In context, it refers to a process of self-evaluation and self-criticism, geared especially toward inducing the individual to be a better cadre who pursues a disciplined life and thoroughly imbibes the thought and policy preferences of Xi.

aspects of thought control.* The inculcation of what is termed Xi Jinping’s Economic Thought has only grown more intensive in the runup to the 20th Party Congress. In June 2022, the Central Propaganda Department† and the National Development and Reform Commission jointly organized and published a new book, the *Outline for Studying Xi Jinping’s Economic Thought*, which was immediately made mandatory reading for all Party organizations at all levels.¹⁹⁷ In studying, cadres were told to “arm their minds with Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” so as to “guide practice, promote work, and more conscientiously use Xi Jinping’s economic thought to guide and solve practical problems,” particularly in areas related to Xi’s “new development philosophy.”‡¹⁹⁸ In effect, Xi wants CCP cadres, particularly those in the most important economic decision-making positions, to internalize his top-level economic development priorities and reflexively produce economic decisions that align with those priorities.§ Correct thought, in Xi’s view, translates into correct action, allowing “the majority of Party members and the masses to feel the formidable power of ideals and beliefs by means of practical actions.”¶¹⁹⁹ David Ownby and Timothy Cheek, China scholars with expertise in political ideology and governance, call Xi’s efforts a “revival of governing by ideology” and consider them a direct response “to the increasing social and intellectual pluralism that China’s economic development and engagement with the world have produced.”²⁰⁰

Governing by Ideology: Zero-COVID Campaign Puts Political Ideology over Economic Growth

China’s strict adherence to the Zero-COVID policy in 2022 demonstrates the extent to which top-down centralized management has displaced local discretion under Xi. The CCP has demanded local officials treat containing the spread of the novel

* Xi explicitly notes in a speech to senior cadres that “to build our party well, we must grasp the ‘key minority’” of Party-state leaders to ensure they all maintain “firm ideals and beliefs.” Xi Jinping, “We Must Be Consistent in Carrying on the Great New Undertaking of Party Building,” (推进党的建设新的伟大工程要一以贯之), *Qiushi*, October 2, 2019. Translation.

† Huang Kunming, another of Xi’s loyalists, runs the Propaganda Department and routinely emphasizes the importance of studying Xi’s economic thought. Formerly, they both worked closely in Fujian and Zhejiang. Neil Thomas, written testimony for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 22.

‡ An online graphic summarizing Xi’s newly compiled book titled “Study Outline of Xi Jinping’s Economic Thought” states that Xi’s thought is the newest Marxist analytic innovation and that “it is clear that strengthening the party’s overall leadership over economic work is the fundamental guarantee for China’s economic development.” *People’s Daily*, “One Picture to Understand the Basic Content of ‘Study Outline of Xi Jinping’s Economic Thought,’” (一图读懂《习近平经济思想学习纲要》基本内容), August 12, 2022. Translation.

§ In a particularly slavish example reminiscent of Mao-era exhortations, one article published in *Qiushi* calls on cadres to “wholeheartedly love and respect the core emotionally” in their “pursuit of truth for Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” *Qiushi*, “How to More Conscientiously Achieve the ‘Two Safeguards?’” (如何更加自觉做到“两个维护”?), January 24, 2022. Translation.

¶ In the same speech, Xi casts lack of ideological “faith” and commitment in existential terms, asking leading cadres rhetorically, “Isn’t that [lack of committed belief] the logic of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the upheaval in Eastern European?” Xi also analyzes the historic cycle of dynastic rise and fall through a paradigm of what he describes as the historical tragedy of great prosperity begetting decline, wherein he sees comfort and wealth bringing on ideological laxity, corruption, moral depravity, and lack of discipline, ultimately leading the ruling regime to fall apart. Xi Jinping, “We Must Be Consistent in Carrying Forward the Great New Undertaking of Party Building” (推进党的建设新的伟大工程要一以贯之), *Qiushi*, October 2, 2019. Translation.

**Governing by Ideology: Zero-COVID Campaign Puts
Political Ideology over Economic Growth—Continued**

coronavirus (COVID-19) as a “political task.”²⁰¹ In spite of considerable economic costs and reports of popular resentment in 2022, local officials have prioritized strict containment measures for fear of potential political and disciplinary consequences from outbreaks.²⁰² In May 2022, Bloomberg reported that more than 4,000 officials had been punished in relation to 51 outbreaks of COVID-19 in China.²⁰³

Stringent lockdowns under Zero-COVID also showcase the policy confusion, conflicting imperatives, and political liability facing cadres. Both the National Development and Reform Commission as well as the State Council have issued measures pushing back on excessive closures and mobility restrictions.²⁰⁴ Other official guidance, including a May 2022 virtual meeting of over 100,000 officials, has also urged local governments to focus on shoring up economic growth.²⁰⁵ In at least one case, officials have even been punished for excessive control measures, including cadres in China’s northern Heilongjiang Province.²⁰⁶

The Party Commands All: Party Penetration of Nonstate Enterprises and Market Steerage

While Xi reconsolidates the Party-state’s capacity to steer the economy through systematic efforts at reward, punishment, and indoctrination, he is also directing an expansion of the Party into all aspects of the economy, including prominent nonstate firms. Xi’s core political principle that “the Party leads everything” was explicitly edited into the Party charter at the 19th Party Congress, at the same time Xi made very clear in his report at the 19th Party Congress that “there must be no irresolution about working to encourage, support, and guide the development of the non-public sector.”²⁰⁷ The rapid expansion of Party organizations within economic entities has been a lynchpin of economic decision-making under Xi. As of 2021, according to official statistics released by *Xinhua News*, the CCP had over 4.8 million Party organizations embedded throughout society, including 1.5 million in enterprises, 933,000 in public institutions, and 742,000 in government agencies.²⁰⁸ Jude Blanchette, Center for Strategic and International Studies Freeman Chair in China Studies, documents that this resurgence of Party organizations in firms began between 2015 and 2017 as foreign companies began to notice Party organizations becoming more active in day-to-day activities of their firms, while Chinese companies increasingly incorporated a role for the organizations into their articles of association.²⁰⁹

Xi hopes to attain two objectives with his increasing penetration of and control over the nonstate sector: first, to rein in economic activity he views as contrary to CCP goals and values; and second, to enlist the nonstate sector in advancing key policy objectives. On the former, policies and campaigns launched by Xi have aimed to limit accumulation of resources and power in centers outside the Party. In part, this stems from a belief that underregulated nonstate entities

will cause financial instability or otherwise undermine market integrity, for instance by building up and abusing monopoly positions.* Relatedly, the CCP under Xi has ramped up regulation of nonstate companies with extensive control over consumer data or issuance of consumer credit.† Beyond control of resources and market influence, Xi has targeted sectors dominated by nonstate firms that do not toe the Party line, most notably major internet and education technology companies in 2021.‡ On the latter—enlisting nonstate firms in fulfilling policy objectives—CCP policy pronouncements expect that market dynamism can deliver where state-owned enterprises and the state-dominated banking system have not, particularly on goals related to innovation.²¹⁰

Financial Levers Aim to Tilt Capital Markets toward Funding Policy Objectives

To achieve an economic outcome that balances these disparate motivations, economic decisions under Xi have attempted to create a financial system and regulatory framework that: (1) guides nonstate capital and firms toward realizing objectives that enhance CCP authority or China’s comprehensive national power while avoiding misallocation of resources and other inefficiencies of central planning; and (2) keeps nonstate entities on message ideologically and constrains their market influence and power vis-à-vis the CCP. To these ends, economic decisions under Xi regarding the nonstate sector have focused on reinforcing carrots and sticks via financial market development and regulatory campaigns.

Financial market development under Xi has focused on bringing corporate fundraising onshore and encouraging inflows of foreign capital while also enabling the CCP to influence which firms get funding.§ The intended outcome is to finance China’s technology development objectives by creating a pipeline of venture-backed firms able to raise large initial public offerings (IPOs) on domestic exchanges.

- *Private markets:* Following the launch of Made in China 2025 in spring 2015, China’s government attempted to supercharge China’s domestic venture capital (VC) ecosystem through industrial government guidance funds.²¹¹ Guided but not actively directed by the central government, these funds position local govern-

*In a crackdown on monopolistic practices in 2020, China’s market regulator fined Alibaba a record \$2.8 billion (renminbi [RMB] 18.2 billion) or 4 percent of its revenue for imposing forcing merchants into exclusivity arrangements with the platform. Meal delivery app Meituan similarly faced a \$534 million (RMB 3.4 billion) fine equal to 3 percent of its revenue for the same practice in October 2021. Unless noted otherwise, this Report uses the following exchange rate from June 30, 2022 throughout: 1 U.S. dollar = 6.70 RMB. Brian Liu and Raquel Leslie, “Meituan Fined in Latest Move to Rein in Chinese Tech Giants,” *Lawfare*, October 14, 2021.

†For instance, Chinese financial regulators required Alibaba affiliate Ant Group, messaging and gaming platform Tencent, and e-commerce giant JD to restructure their consumer lending businesses as financial holding firms subject to the similar regulatory capital requirements as banks. Zhang Yuzhe, Hu Yue, and Luo Meihan, “Exclusive: Tencent Ordered to Set Up Financial Holding Company,” *Caixin Global*, May 26, 2021; *Bloomberg News*, “JD Digits Plans Finance Holding Company as China Tightens Rules,” April 7, 2021.

‡For more discussion of China’s regulatory tightening against technology firms in 2020, see “Chinese Regulators Crack Down on Big Tech,” in U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 2, Section 1, “Year in Review: Economics and Trade,” in *2021 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2021, 134–136.

§For a discussion of risks to U.S. security from foreign investment in China’s capital markets, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 2, Section 4, “U.S.-China Financial Connectivity and Risks to U.S. National Security,” in *2021 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2021.

ments and agencies as VC investors raising both government and outside investment to fund firms in sectors designated as priorities under Chinese industrial policies, such as semiconductor manufacturing or biotechnology.* In practice, the outside investment is often still derived from the state-funded sources such as state-owned enterprises and state-run banks.†²¹² A study conducted by Gavekal, a research consultancy, at the height of government guidance fund raising efforts in late 2018 found that it was typical for state sources to constitute at least 90 percent of the capital raised by many of the funds.²¹³

- *Public markets:* Under Xi, China has launched two attempts to create new stock exchanges that cater to Chinese tech startups. Rules for listing on the main boards of the Shanghai and Shenzhen stock exchanges favor established firms with larger revenue bases. The Shanghai Stock Exchange opened the STAR market in July 2019 and shares began trading on the Beijing Stock Exchange in November 2021.²¹⁴ Both focus on listing technology firms; when the Beijing Stock Exchange opened, nearly a quarter of the companies listed on the exchange made engineering, agriculture, or aviation equipment.²¹⁵ The design of capital markets could further prioritize projects favored by the Party through a “traffic light” mechanism proposed at the Central Economic Work Conference in December 2021.²¹⁶ No formal policy has yet been released, but a report by the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission and comments by finance officials suggest the mechanism would incentivize investment in “green light” priority areas and prevent investment in “red light” areas (for more on the traffic light system, see Chapter 2, Section 1, “Year in Review: Economics and Trade”).²¹⁷

Under Xi, China’s financial regulators have also aggressively choked off financing to nonstate entities they view as unaligned with the CCP’s economic or political goals. Perhaps most notably, the Shanghai Stock Exchange suspended Alibaba affiliate Ant Group’s planned IPO in November 2020, a decision Xi reportedly issued himself after former Alibaba CEO Jack Ma publicly criticized China’s financial regulators.²¹⁸ China’s government also exacerbated China’s economic slowdown in 2020 and 2021 by blocking bank lending to highly indebted property developers.

Consequences for China’s Economy

Although Xi assesses centralization and his nationalist modernization drive to be in a highly symbiotic relationship, in practice these two trends may very well work at cross-purposes. First, the

*For more background on government guidance funds, see “Government Guidance Funds Attempt to Combine Policy Imperative and Profit Motive,” in U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 2, Section 3, “The Chinese Government’s Evolving Control of the Nonstate Sector,” in *2021 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2021, 224–226.

†As researchers at Georgetown’s Center for Security and Emerging Technology note, government guidance funds typically use the limited partnership structure common in private equity. The guidance fund’s general partner is generally a fund manager established by a government agency or a state-owned investment firm or third-party fund manager, while other investors, though predominantly investing state funds, are limited partners. Ngor Luong, Zachary Arnold, and Ben Murphy, “Chinese Government Guidance Funds: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Center for Security and Emerging Technology*, March 2021, 3.

manner in which the CCP is pursuing its top-down drive to rein in the fragmented bureaucracy, local governments, and vested interests may be undermining the local experimentation that has served as an important source of regime adaptability and resilience. Lower-level officials and economic decision-makers are now simultaneously beset with an increasingly complex set of modernization mandates from the top as well as an increasingly coercive performance monitoring regime, creating fear and paralysis.

Second, as in other areas of CCP economic decision-making, policy toward the nonstate sector under Xi has been guided by a “Party knows best” mentality. Further embedding of Leninist political institutions in China’s nonstate firms increases top-down control and drives companies to fill political rather than market objectives. This approach treats the market as a tool to allocate resources toward ends predetermined by the CCP and is skeptical of any market function beyond serving policy goals. As a result, policy rather than the market increasingly determines where resources are allocated, while greater involvement of the nonstate sector in fulfilling policy objectives continues to lead to wasted investment and overcapacity.* Encouragement of nonstate capital to invest in China’s speculative VC and stock markets has also increased financial risks. Where industrial policy formerly relied on provision of bank loans to state-owned enterprises, China’s current direction ties a greater share of private wealth to the inefficiency and poor returns of the planned economy. Leninist revival and reassertion of state intervention is, and will continue, leading nonstate firms to look to Beijing rather than the market for resources, permission, and guidance. Rather than broadly promoting innovation-driven development and improving productivity, factors fundamental to Beijing’s aspirational rejuvenation, Xi’s centralization of economic decision-making may undermine them.

Finally, Xi’s recentralization process to overcome parochial vested interests may simply be leading one set of regime insiders to replace another. The Party-state’s growing control over economic resources and capacity to steer the economy reinforces incentives for corruption and state capture and only expands the role for vested interests, at least in the economic arenas and industries Xi favors. At the same time, a growing coterie of Xi loyalists is nested throughout the Party-state structure, creating the potential for insiders to operate below the surface so long as they espouse political loyalty and limit ostentatious signs of corruption. Centralization may therefore not only work at cross purposes with Xi’s aspirational modernization goals (i.e., success even on his own terms) but also exacerbate some of the most pressing problems he set out to resolve in the first place.

* Poor results of China’s various semiconductor funds, which have channeled an estimated \$150 billion in state funding into developing the country’s semiconductor industry, are a case in point. Most of the fabrication technologies acquired in China’s semiconductor push are generations behind the cutting edge, and where China has managed to close the gap, production remains in very small scale. For more on China’s semiconductor industry, see Chapter 2, Section 4, “U.S. Supply Chain Vulnerabilities and Resilience.” Alex He, “China’s Techno-Industrial Development: A Case Study of the Semiconductor Industry,” Centre for International Governance Innovation No. 252, May 2021, 18; Karen M. Sutter, “China’s New Semiconductor Policies: Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service* CRS R 46767, April 20, 2021, 4.

Foreign Policy Decision-Making

General Secretary Xi's concentration of power in the CCP and into his own hands extends to China's foreign policy decision-making system.²¹⁹ Under Xi, China's foreign policy decision-making apparatus is increasingly centralized and concentrated at the highest levels in order to address perceived risks to the CCP's authority emanating from China's international environment. Institutional reforms to the foreign policy system under Xi stem from his and other CCP leaders' perception of growing security risks in the international arena and reflect a desire for a more rapid and efficient decision-making process, better policy coordination, and more reliable implementation in the changing environment.²²⁰ As CCP Politburo member and top diplomat Yang Jiechi put it in 2017, China's foreign policy approach under Xi developed in response to "profound changes in China's relations with the world" and is designed to "enable [China] to firmly occupy a position of strategic initiative amidst a complicated and oft-changing international structure."²²¹

Foreign Policy Decision-Making Prior to Xi

The CCP leadership has been the central authority for China's foreign policy since the founding of the PRC in 1949.²²² Under Xi's predecessors Jiang and Hu, this foreign policy decision-making apparatus was headed by the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee, which met frequently to decide on foreign policy issues on behalf of the CCP Central Committee.²²³ Party sources described the decision-making process as "collective leadership, democratic centralism, individual preparation and decisions made at meetings."²²⁴ The general secretary had particular influence as the only Politburo Standing Committee member with a specifically designated purview over foreign affairs.²²⁵ Nevertheless, he remained only "first among equals" on all matters, while other members had the liberty to dissent and at times even prevailed over his foreign policy preferences, such as then Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang's endorsement supporting China National Petroleum Corporation's investment in an unstable Sudan.²²⁶

Beneath the top Party leadership, foreign policy formulation drew on a deep and complex bureaucratic hierarchy that included the former Central Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and Central National Security Leading Small Group, which assisted the Party leaders in consensus building.²²⁷ It also included line ministries responsible for information gathering and the provision of policy recommendations in addition to implementation, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, and Ministry of State Security.²²⁸ Additionally, reforms instituted by Deng Xiaoping caused a strong trend toward "diversification" of relevant actors in China's foreign policy system.²²⁹ Beginning in the 1980s, actors such as foreign affairs think tanks, local governments, and Chinese companies emerged as important players in China's foreign policy and created a layered foreign policy with multiple stakeholders.²³⁰ Provinces and major cities in particular took the initiative to advance their own foreign relations and develop new links abroad.²³¹

Centralizing Decision-Making Power in the CCP

Xi has strengthened the role of central Party leadership in the foreign policy decision-making process relative to the ministries and other actors. As Yang Jiechi explained in 2018, the explicit end goal of this centralization is an arrangement by which “the Party assumes full responsibility for the overall situation and coordinates the foreign affairs work of all parties.”²³² As in other fields, the formalization of decision-making power in CCP commissions reflects a strengthening of Party control relative to other actors.

As he has in other policy areas, Xi has advanced this goal by reconstituting the CCP’s leading small groups as permanent standing commissions of the Central Committee, turning them into a “true nerve center” of the Party’s foreign policymaking process.²³³ This change gives the CCP central leadership more power to coordinate actions by various parts of the bureaucracy, cut through bureaucratic roadblocks, and override competing goals by other stakeholders.²³⁴ An important example is the promotion of the Party’s Central Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group to permanent status as the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC)* in March 2018, which strengthened the CCP’s ability to coordinate and manage everyday foreign affairs work.²³⁵ Whereas the former Central Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group was reportedly often bypassed by government agencies who viewed it as ineffective, the CFAC, and more specifically the CFAC Office,† has become the central executive organ for foreign policy decision-making under Xi’s leadership.²³⁶ The head of the CFAC Office, currently Yang Jiechi, reports directly to Xi in the latter’s role as CFAC Chairman, and Xi in turn relies upon the CFAC Office for information on major foreign policy issues.²³⁷ In contrast, the Minister of Foreign Affairs (currently Wang Yi), does not have a direct line to Xi and must report to the CFAC.²³⁸

Xi’s elevation of the CNSC further strengthened Party leadership over the conduct of China’s foreign policy by overlaying foreign policy decisions with considerations of regime security.²³⁹ Because of the broad nature of Xi’s Comprehensive National Security Concept, there is inevitable overlap between jurisdictions of the CNSC and the CFAC when considering national security threats from abroad.²⁴⁰ The CNSC is regarded as more prominent and important to foreign affairs than even the CFAC due to the former’s direct association with Xi’s Comprehensive National Security Concept.‡²⁴¹

*The full membership of the CFAC has not been publicized, although it likely includes the members of its predecessor, the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, namely the heads of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, CCP International Liaison Department, Propaganda Department, Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Commerce, the Taiwan Affairs Office, Hong Kong and Macau Affairs office, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, and the State Council Information Office. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “China’s Foreign and Security Policy Institutions and Decision-Making under Xi Jinping,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23:2 (2021): 319–336, 324.

†The CFAC Office is the permanent staff organization that supports the operations of the CFAC. It is also sometimes referred to as the Central Committee Foreign Affairs Office (CCFAO) or the Central Office of Foreign Affairs (COFA). Guoguang Wu, “The Emergence of the Central Office of Foreign Affairs: From Leadership Politics to ‘Greater Diplomacy,’” *China Leadership Monitor*, September 1, 2021; Jean-Pierre Cabestan, “China’s Foreign and Security Policy Institutions and Decision-Making under Xi Jinping,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23:2 (2021): 324–325.

‡While the exact division of responsibilities between the two commissions is not explicitly defined in public information, it is likely that the CNSC would take priority over the CFAC in the event of a conflict of interest. In addition to the CNSC possessing a direct affiliation with Xi’s Comprehensive National Security Concept, the CNSC’s aggregate membership also outranks

The practical implication of this difference in ranking is that any decisions the CFAC makes on the conduct of diplomacy must comport with national security requirements set by the CNSC.²⁴²

In parallel with the centralization of authority in the Party, latitude for local actors to design and drive foreign interactions has also been constrained under Xi. Although the legacy of foreign policy diversification under previous leaders means local governments are still allowed to commit to some outbound international investment projects without first acquiring central approval, Xi has increasingly limited local government autonomy in foreign affairs.²⁴³ Since Xi came to power, central government agencies involved in foreign affairs have put a stronger emphasis on ensuring uniform policy implementation at the local level.²⁴⁴ According to a written statement submitted for the Commission's hearing record from Jean-Pierre Cabestan, research professor of political science at Hong Kong Baptist University, the central government has especially strengthened its control over the external relations of regions Beijing considers sensitive, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia.²⁴⁵

Putting Xi at the Core of China's Foreign Policy

Xi has strengthened his personal role in foreign policy decision-making through his political elevation within the Party, a de-emphasis on collective decision-making, and his increasing influence over the Party's official ideology.²⁴⁶ Yang Jiechi summarized the new state of affairs in a July 2021 *People's Daily* article, stating that "Xi Jinping has made the strategies" for China's foreign relations since coming to power and attributing diplomatic achievements firstly to "Xi Jinping's personal commandship and actions."²⁴⁷ Yun Sun, senior fellow and codirector of the East Asia program and director of the China studies program at the Stimson Center, assessed in her testimony to the Commission that the model of foreign policy decision-making based around collective leadership "ended with [General Secretary] Xi's ascension to power," to be replaced by a system centered on adhering to Xi's ultimate authority.²⁴⁸ Although foreign policy decisions remain subject to a level of approval by the Politburo or its Standing Committee, Xi's elevated political status bolsters his ability to impose his personal decisions on those bodies relative to his predecessors.²⁴⁹ His position as chairman of both the CFAC and the CNSC also multiplies his authority by giving him the ability to direct and supervise the work of both commissions and their associated offices.²⁵⁰ On a purely operational level, compared to his predecessors, Xi has made greater use of his authority to convene high-level foreign affairs work conferences, conduct foreign diplomatic travel, and receive foreign visitors.²⁵¹

Xi enforces his paramount authority to personally guide China's foreign policy decision-making through the official promotion of so-called "Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy." Authoritative Party sources present this supposed summary of Xi's foreign policy positions as the foundational theory and "guide for action" for China's foreign affairs work.²⁵² Descriptions of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplo-

that of the CFAC, granting it greater relative bureaucratic power. Yun Sun, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 8–9.

macy also suggest his prerogative includes not only the right to give high-level guidance on broad matters like “strategy,” “doctrine,” and “principles” but also the ability to give direction on lower-level “responsibilities,” “mechanisms,” “operations,” and “tactics” of China’s foreign affairs.²⁵³ A summary of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy has been compiled and distributed across the Party and foreign policy apparatus, and the study of its contents has been mandated to ensure the bureaucracy’s compliance with Xi’s vision.²⁵⁴ Demonstrating that the broader trend of Xi’s personal embodiment of Party authority also applies in foreign policy, Yang Jiechi claimed in *Qiushi* in 2017 that Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy represents the will and conclusions of the entire Central Committee.²⁵⁵

Xi’s Major Foreign Policy Initiatives: Case Studies

Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is widely considered Xi’s “signature” foreign policy initiative, provides an illustration of the top-down, Party-centered, and personalized foreign policymaking process in the Xi era.²⁵⁶ Official descriptions* of BRI trace its development from an idea originating with Xi himself, through high-level Party coordination, to elaboration within central government ministries, and finally to lower-level implementation by local governments and in the international arena.²⁵⁷ The process exhibits a high degree of vertical coordination in which lower-level decisions are mandated within the framework set out for them from above.²⁵⁸ Yuen Yuen Ang, associate professor at the University of Michigan, describes BRI as a clear example of a “policy campaign” in which the top leader mobilizes bureaucrats and other stakeholders to support a single vision, which may initially be relatively loosely defined.²⁵⁹ Throughout the process, Xi has remained both a driving force behind BRI’s privileged status and a gatekeeper for policy adjustments. The combination of his personal leadership and a strict interpretation of China’s national security interests leave little space for meaningful policy changes.

Top-Down, Party-Centric Mobilization

The guiding concept and overall design for BRI originated at the top of the system, and Xi announced its original components in two international speeches in September and October 2013.†²⁶⁰ Since

*A speech by Xi in November 2021 clearly illustrated the top-down design of the BRI, insisting: “It is necessary to persist in the Party’s centralized and unified leadership; the Leading Small Group must grasp well the coordination and control of major plans, major policies, major items, major issues, and annual key tasks. Relevant departments must incorporate joint construction of the ‘Belt and Road’ into the important agenda and make overall plans for effective implementation of international project construction and risk prevention and control responsibilities. Local governments must find an orientation to participate in the joint construction of the ‘Belt and Road.’” Similarly, an official description of BRI posted by China’s representative mission to the UN traces the idea directly from Xi’s introduction, to the creation of a CCP leading group, to the publication of government plans, to the eventual consultation with other countries in international fora and BRI’s incorporation into the agenda in international organizations. China Internet News Center and China Institute of International Studies, “Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and China’s Diplomacy in the New Era: One Belt One Road” (习近平外交思想和新时代中国外交: 一带一路), Translation; Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, “The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects.”

†Experts assess that Xi came up with the idea along with some of his closest advisors. Xi frequently describes himself as having proposed the initiative and in 2017 claimed “This initiative originates from my observation and reflection on the world situation.” Nadège Rolland,

BRI's inception, Xi has mobilized the Party and government apparatus to carry out the initiative as a priority task and established a government hierarchy to implement it.²⁶¹ Only a month after Xi's second speech, the CCP Central Committee endorsed the concept as a component of China's long-term economic strategy in its Third Plenum.²⁶² Party leadership further elevated the initiative in 2014 at the Central Economic Work Conference, the CCP-led economic planning meeting between the CCP Central Committee and State Council that lays out an economic policy agenda for the coming year.²⁶³ In March 2015, the CCP demonstrated its intention to coordinate the initiative at the highest level by creating a Central Leading Small Group for BRI Development headed by a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and including several other Politburo members.²⁶⁴ The office for the leading small group was established within the National Development and Reform Commission, ensuring a close link between the Party decision-makers and government bureaucracy.²⁶⁵ The National Development and Reform Commission, in turn, was put in charge of coordinating actual BRI projects with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce.*²⁶⁶

General Secretary Xi's Personal Role

BRI is closely linked to Xi's personal legacy,[†] giving it staying power in China's foreign policy system.²⁶⁷ Ms. Sun assessed in her testimony that "through the Initiative, Xi successfully tied the whole foreign policy apparatus to his personal leadership and authority over Chinese foreign policy."²⁶⁸ A close affiliation with Xi makes BRI an unavoidable topic for all relevant agencies and means that a lack of enthusiasm in participation risks being interpreted as political disloyalty.²⁶⁹ Xi has also used his status to continue involving himself in the ongoing promotion, implementation, and redefinition of BRI. According to commentary from China's Ministry of National Defense in 2021, BRI remains subject to "the personal planning, personal deployment, and personal promotion of General Secretary Xi Jinping."²⁷⁰ Since 2013, Xi has demonstrated a continued personal commitment to BRI by promoting it in his own speeches, leading

written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on China's Belt and Road Initiative: Five Years Later*, January 25, 2018, 4; Bei An, Xiyao Xie, and Xin Wen, "Commentary on General Secretary Xi Jinping's Plan to Promote the Joint Construction of the 'Belt and Road'" (习近平总书记谋划推动共建“一带一路”述评), *China's Ministry of National Defense*, November 19, 2021, 3. Translation; China Internet News Center and China Institute of International Studies, "Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and China's Diplomacy in the New Era: One Belt One Road" (习近平外交思想和新时代中国外交：一带一路), Translation.

*In March 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission jointly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce issued a general roadmap for the initiative, laying out principles, priorities, coordination mechanisms, and planned Chinese government actions for the implementation of BRI. Suisheng Zhao, "China's Belt-Road Initiative as the Signature of President Xi Jinping Diplomacy: Easier Said than Done," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29:123 (2020): 319–335, 321; Nadège Rolland, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on China's Belt and Road Initiative: Five Years Later*, January 25, 2018, 4; Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects."

†The CCP's 19th Party Congress in 2017 officially incorporated BRI into the Party Charter alongside Xi's other contributions to Party doctrine, suggesting BRI will continue to frame China's foreign affairs for many years to come. Suisheng Zhao, "China's Belt-Road Initiative as the Signature of President Xi Jinping Diplomacy: Easier Said than Done," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29:123 (2020): 319–335, 321; Nadège Rolland, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on China's Belt and Road Initiative: Five Years Later*, January 25, 2018, 5.

Politburo study sessions on the topic, presiding over international symposiums and conferences, and carrying out both overseas visits and domestic inspections.²⁷¹

BRI also conforms to Xi's Comprehensive National Security Concept in its emphasis on coordinating all available national resources to pursue both internal and external security goals under strict Party leadership. The project is designed to mobilize and coordinate the use of political, economic, diplomatic, military, and ideological resources in an integrated way to pursue both internal and external security objectives.²⁷² An independent task force report published by the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations concluded that China's leaders hope BRI will improve China's security by several means, including by reorienting global economic activity toward China; increasing economic growth and thus political stability in China's minority-dominated regions; generating economic leverage China can use to pressure other countries not to criticize its government and policies; and providing intelligence and access to facilities that could one day benefit China's military.²⁷³ As in other policy fields, Xi's guidance on BRI also emphasizes the necessity of Party leadership and control as well as the proactive management of risks.²⁷⁴

Top-Level Adjustment to an Unchanged Agenda

Although BRI has undergone some reframing in response to changing international conditions, the policy adjustments have largely been issued from the top and have not altered the policy's underlying objective. Poor financial, social, and environmental standards of BRI projects produced widespread international pushback after the first few years of mobilization, and China has responded to global criticism by attempting to rebrand BRI and improve its international reputation.²⁷⁵ Xi has personally led this effort from the top, pledging in 2018 to reorient the initiative toward poverty alleviation, green development, economic sustainability, and higher project standards.²⁷⁶ Official sources credit Xi with "put[ting] forward a new requirement for the next stage of work," namely the new focus on "high-quality development."²⁷⁷ A comparison of Xi's speeches before and after this adjustment also reflect a shift in messaging toward a greater emphasis on consultation, environmental impact, standards, and project quality.²⁷⁸ Nevertheless, this messaging shift and any accompanying adjustments to project type alter neither the overall security benefits the Chinese leadership seeks from the initiative nor its fundamental implementation process or its privileged place in China's diplomatic interactions.²⁷⁹

Global Security Initiative

Xi's Global Security Initiative is another example of how major diplomatic projects are conceived, introduced, and expanded within his centralized foreign policy system. The Global Security Initiative is Xi's recently announced effort to reshape the norms of international security and make them more favorable to China, primarily by delegitimizing military alliances as a means of achieving security goals.²⁸⁰ (For more on the objectives of the Global Security Initiative, see Chapter 3, Section 1, "Year in Review: Security and Foreign Affairs.") The initiative has been described internally as a "concrete

manifestation of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy,” linking it to Xi’s broader vision and instructions for the conduct of China’s foreign affairs.²⁸¹ As a relatively recent initiative, it provides a window into the process of continuous policy development under Xi whereby new initiatives are built upon the foundation of his previously established concepts.

Like BRI, the Global Security Initiative is a framework Xi introduced to guide China’s foreign policy that is being carried out and elaborated upon through top-down Party leadership. It was introduced as a relatively broad concept by Xi himself at the Boao Forum for Asia* on April 21, 2022.²⁸² Xi’s speech laid out six major elements of the initiative, which have since been officially designated the “six commitments.”†²⁸³ In the months since the Global Security Initiative’s introduction, the “six commitments” have been faithfully echoed in other Party and government sources and gradually rolled out in diplomatic statements around the globe.²⁸⁴ Although the Global Security Initiative is still in its earliest stages, Dr. Greitens assessed in her testimony that it is likely to closely follow the pattern set by Xi’s other named initiatives over the upcoming one to two years as the various levels of the Party-state work to transform Xi’s initial directive into concrete policies.²⁸⁵

Policy concepts and Party structures Xi has put in place already appear to have played a leading role in the development of the new initiative. As Dr. Greitens explained in her testimony for the Commission, the Global Security Initiative should be understood as the international projection of Xi’s Comprehensive National Security Concept that centers on regime security.²⁸⁶ Although the initiative has not yet been widely presented as such abroad, authoritative Chinese sources are very explicit about this framing and argue that Xi’s national security concept forms the “theoretical foundation” for the Global Security Initiative.²⁸⁷ For example, the Global Security Initiative is referred to as “a vivid practice for guiding China’s diplomatic work based on the Comprehensive National Security Concept” and a “further enrich[ment of] the ‘world chapter’ of the Comprehensive National Security Concept.”²⁸⁸ Based on an assessment of its publications in 2022, a particular Party-affiliated research organization known as the Comprehensive National Security Concept Research Center also appears to have played a leading role in both laying the theoretical groundwork for and fleshing out the initial details of the Global Security Initiative.²⁸⁹ The organization was founded on April 14, 2021, with the mandate to develop and promote

*The Boao Forum for Asia is an international organization with a mission of promoting economic integration and advancing development in Asia, headquartered in Boao in Hainan, China. Boao Forum for Asia, “About BFA,” 2021–2022.

†The “six commitments” are: (1) “staying committed to the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security”; (2) “staying committed to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries”; (3) “staying committed to abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter”; (4) “staying committed to taking seriously the legitimate security concerns of all countries”; (5) “staying committed to peacefully resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation”; and (6) “staying committed to maintaining security in both traditional and non-traditional domains.” China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Global Security Initiative—China’s Latest Contribution to Peace and Development in a Changing World*, May 19, 2022; Wang Yi, “Implement the Global Security Initiative, Safeguard World Peace and Tranquility” (落实全球安全倡议, 守护世界和平安宁), *People’s Daily*, April 24, 2022. Translation; China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Xi Jinping Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2022*, April 21, 2022.

Xi's Comprehensive National Security Concept.*²⁹⁰ This tight association with Xi's guiding principle on China's national security will likely ensure the Global Security Initiative remains a foreign policy priority as long as Xi is in power.

Consequences for Foreign Affairs

Xi lays out an assertive direction for China's foreign policy, which is then faithfully carried out by the institutional setup beneath him.²⁹¹ Xi's vision for China's foreign affairs is one that manages China's external environment to ensure China's "rejuvenation" under the CCP is accommodated and facilitated abroad.²⁹² The CN-SC's domination of the bureaucratic level ensures that policy choices conform to a strict interpretation of China's national security interests, leaving little space for ambiguity or compromise.²⁹³ The mandate from above in turn compels the diplomatic corps to adopt the "Wolf Warrior" ethos, treating any perceived slight against China internationally as an attack warranting an aggressive response.²⁹⁴

On a conceptual level, Xi's Comprehensive National Security Concept acts as an important framework for foreign policy decision-making under Xi.²⁹⁵ In other words, the mandate of China's diplomatic corps is determined through a lens of regime security and includes defending Beijing's broad definition of territorial sovereignty, combatting what it considers separatism and terrorism, defending overseas interests, promoting economic and financial security, and—above all—maintaining the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system.²⁹⁶ For example, China's March 2021 retaliatory countersanctions against entities and individuals in the EU were applied not only to official government institutions and representatives but also to two independent think tanks and two private scholars because the CCP alleged that their critical analysis of China's repressive Hong Kong and Xinjiang policies was a threat to China's "national sovereignty, national security and development interests."²⁹⁷ In a summary article on Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy in May 2022, Yang Jiechi further illustrated this concept by highlighting China's "forceful" responses to other countries' so-called "provocations" related to Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, maritime issues, and human rights as a key success for China's diplomacy over the past year.²⁹⁸

Xi's political elevation produces a reinforcing "bandwagon effect" throughout the bureaucracy and in research institutions, decreasing the channels for contrasting ideas to influence choices at the top.²⁹⁹ According to Yun Sun, Xi's leading role means officials who do not share his vision for foreign policy "are naturally

*The secretariat of the Comprehensive National Security Concept Research Center is located inside the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR)—itself a leading policy research organ under the supervision of the CCP Central Committee. According to CICIR's president, Yuan Peng, the Research Center's work is currently oriented around the "study, research, and promot[ion]" of an official outline of Xi's Comprehensive National Security Concept, which was produced by the CCP Central Committee's Propaganda Department and the Office of the Central National Security Commission, which Xi chairs. Yuan Peng, "The Fundamental Principles for Maintaining and Shaping National Security in the New Era—Study the 'Study Outline of the Comprehensive National Security Concept'" (新时代维护和塑造国家安全的根本遵循——学习《总体国家安全观学习纲要》), *People's Daily*, April 26. Translation; *Rule of Law Daily*, "Comprehensive National Security Concept Research Center Established" (总体国家安全观研究中心挂牌成立), April 15, 2021. Translation; *Xinhua*, "Comprehensive National Security Concept Research Center Established" (总体国家安全观研究中心成立), April 14, 2021. Translation; DBpedia, "About: China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations."

marginalized in the decision-making circle.”³⁰⁰ Xi has also overseen the imposition of stricter political controls on policy think tanks.³⁰¹ At the lower levels, scholars whose views contrast with the top leadership’s position do not receive support for their work, as resources are directed toward those who will defend Xi’s chosen agenda.³⁰² Thus, even though there has been an increase in the number of think tanks during Xi’s tenure, there is little reason to believe they will publicly question the assertive course set at the top of the system.³⁰³

BRI’s evolution as a foreign policy platform illustrates that Xi can command rigorous implementation of his foreign policy initiatives through all levels of China’s foreign affairs bureaucracy as well as at the local levels and that his framing has staying power in China’s system even in the face of international backlash. Although China’s foreign policy apparatus is also capable of making adjustments, such changes must still be centrally directed and may even be largely cosmetic in nature, reflecting a change in the top’s assessment of the best way to reach a consistent goal rather than a fundamental policy reorientation. The Global Security Initiative further illuminates the lasting effect of Xi’s initiatives by illustrating how new policies can continue to grow out of the foundational ideas and institutions Xi created.

Military Decision-Making

China’s decision-making on the use of its military and paramilitary forces is highly centralized and increasingly personalized. Command authority for China’s military and paramilitary forces rests with the CMC, the CCP Central Committee’s designated military policy body.* Under General Secretary Xi, reforms increased centralization and vested more responsibility and final decision-making power in Xi himself. Consequently, the goals and use of China’s military and paramilitary forces are subject to immense personal discretion by Xi, particularly in crisis situations. CCP leaders continuously scrutinize the military’s loyalty, with several reforms and increased emphasis on “political work” in the military and paramilitary forces designed to strengthen loyalty to the Party and ultimately to Xi himself. This combination of central control and emphasis on political loyalty leads to micromanagement and inefficiency in some areas of military decision-making.

The CCP’s decision-making for the military must account for the paradox of coercive power: that the very organizations with the capability to physically defend the Party and the regime from internal and external threats definitionally also possess a latent ability to threaten the regime itself. In recognition of this paradox, the CCP has granted armed forces two primary missions: to “obey the Party’s command” and be able to “fight and win”—and notably in that order.³⁰⁴ In 2015, Xi described his greatest concerns for the Chinese

*The CMC is the current iteration of a longstanding Party organ tasked with leadership of the military since before the founding of the PRC. The name and exact composition of the organ has changed several times. The current iteration, established in 1954, readopts the name “Central Military Commission,” which it has held on several previous occasions. *People’s Daily*, “CCP Central Military Commission” (中共中央军事委员会), Translation; *People’s Daily*, “Military History Today September 28: CCP Central Military Commission Established” (军史今日9月28日: 中共中央军事委员会成立), September 28, 2018. Translation.

military, saying, “What I think about most is, when the Party and the people most need it, will our military be able to always adhere to the absolute leadership of the Party, will it be able to take on the challenge to fight and win.”³⁰⁵ Reforms of the decision-making structure under Xi have sought to improve the armed forces’ ability to fulfil both missions.³⁰⁶

Military Decision-Making Prior to Xi

Previous leaders’ inability to assert operational authority over the military amid a fragmented decision-making system or to address corruption raised concerns among the top leadership about the erosion of CCP control over the military.³⁰⁷ The PLA itself exercised a significant amount of autonomy from Party leaders.³⁰⁸ The PLA’s four general departments* essentially operated as “independent kingdoms” with the broad authority to make decisions in their areas of responsibility without oversight from the CMC.³⁰⁹ Decision-making was impeded by a lack of information sharing, as the PLA leveraged tight control over military intelligence and information about its own capabilities and operations as a bureaucratic advantage against both Party leadership and state ministries.³¹⁰ The amassed power of the poorly supervised general departments and military regions also led to growing financial waste and corruption throughout the force, raising serious concerns about PLA combat readiness.³¹¹ Operational decision-making was also disjointed, with command and control split between military regions and service branches.³¹² Reforms necessary for modern warfare in command and control, administration, and other areas long eluded previous leaders like Jiang and Hu due to their relatively weak position with the military and stiff resistance from the general departments that were both the strongest entrenched interests and the biggest prospective losers in such reforms.³¹³

Prior to Xi’s centralization of full Party control over the military, China’s governmental and local authorities exercised a notable amount of authority and discretion regarding the use of the military and paramilitary forces. The State Council shared authority with the CMC over the funding and operation of the People’s Armed Police (PAP, China’s paramilitary force), which then fell under the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and subdivisions of authority tied to the provinces.³¹⁴ Local government and Party officials had some discretionary control over local PAP units.³¹⁵ Reports from the Hu era reveal that some local leaders had coopted the PAP to carry out extralegal tax collection, debt recovery, land seizure, and even political violence, causing concern that local leaders might also be able to use them to resist central authority.³¹⁶ Local Party secretaries could also take advantage of their leadership of local Party committees to direct operations by local PLA reserve units for personal gain.³¹⁷

*The four general departments of the PLA included the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armaments Department. Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “Introduction: Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA,” in Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, National Defense University, February 22, 2019, 6.

Centralizing Decision-Making Power in the CCP's CMC

Reconcentration of authority over the policies and operations of all China's armed security forces, both military and paramilitary, is a defining feature of Xi-era decision-making reforms. The CMC's role as the central institution responsible for making decisions about the use of China's armed forces has been greatly strengthened. This level of central control has come at the expense of previously autonomous PLA organizations, the State Council, and local officials of both the Party and the state.

Broadening the CMC's Central Control

Xi's military reforms overhauled the broad division of labor within the PLA such that the CMC provides overall management and direction, the theater commands focus on operations and warfighting, and the services are responsible for "force-building," or what the U.S. military refers to as "man, train, and equip" responsibilities.*³¹⁸ A critical element of this effort involved disbanding the PLA's four powerful general departments into 15 less individually powerful organizations in 2016 and incorporating their responsibilities directly into a restructured CMC.†³¹⁹ The change reduced the accumulated power of the PLA's "General Headquarters" (the four general departments, but primarily the General Staff Department) by placing its former functions such as training, mobilization, and strategic planning under direct CMC control with an eye toward improving information flows between the PLA and Party leadership.³²⁰ Xi's reforms also removed the heads of the individual services (PLA Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force) from direct involvement in decision-making at the CMC level and assigned responsibility for directing warfighting to the newly formed theater commands, taking away two key functions from the service chiefs.³²¹

Reforms to China's paramilitary forces, namely the PAP and Coast Guard, in 2017 and 2018 made them solely responsible to the CMC and clarified their identity as part of the broader armed forces.‡ Prior to Xi's reforms, the PAP operated under the dual leadership of both the CMC and the State Council.³²² The State Council oversaw the PAP's operations, budget, size, and composition.³²³ On January 1, 2018, the CCP Central Committee discarded this dual-leadership system and granted the CMC full control

* For more on Xi's reforms to the CMC, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 2, Section 2, "China's Military Reorganization and Modernization, Implications for the United States," in *2018 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2018, 205–258; and U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 2, Section 1, "Year in Review: Security and Foreign Affairs," in *2016 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2016, 193–254.

† The CMC now has 15 major subordinate organizations, which replaced the previous four general departments as part of the ongoing PLA reforms in 2016. They include the General Office, Joint Staff Department, Political Work Department, Logistics Support Department, Equipment Development Department, Training Management Department, National Defense Mobilization Department, Discipline Inspection Commission, Political and Legal Affairs Commission, Science and Technology Commission, Strategic Planning Office, Reform and Organization Office, International Military Cooperation Office, Audit Bureau, and Organ Affairs General Management Bureau. Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, "Introduction: Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA," in Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, National Defense University, February 22, 2019, 6–7.

‡ For more on Xi's reforms to the paramilitary forces, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 2, Section 2, "China's Military Reorganization and Modernization, Implications for the United States," in *2018 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2018, 205–258.

of the PAP.³²⁴ In March 2018 the CCP Central Committee also divested the PAP of several law enforcement, economic, and other non-paramilitary units (such as firefighters) and reassigned them to the State Council.*³²⁵ That same year, the China Coast Guard, which previously reported to the State Council's State Oceanic Administration, became the Maritime Police Contingent of the PAP.³²⁶ The result was a unified paramilitary organization with both land and sea missions incorporated directly into the line of military command.

Removing Local CCP Officials from the Chain of Command

Xi's reforms removed local CCP officials from the command structure of PLA reserve and PAP units. Prior to 2016, regional Party secretaries had frequently served as so-called "first commissars" of PLA reserve units within Provincial Military Districts, a designation that had allowed them to act as the first among equals over a reserve unit's military commander and political commissar.³²⁷ Roderick Lee, research director at the U.S. Air Force China Aerospace Studies Institute, assessed in his testimony to the Commission that this role granted local civilian leaders influence over the operations of local units and hence a level of power they could easily use for personal gain.³²⁸ After the reforms, local civilian authorities could no longer use PLA reserve units for local purposes without the relevant theater command assuming joint command over those forces.³²⁹ Similarly, prior to Xi's reforms, local Ministry of Public Security (MPS) officials held the designation of "first commissar" in local PAP detachments, affording them some discretionary control of those forces.³³⁰ As Joel Wuthnow, senior research fellow at the National Defense University Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, testified before the Commission, in practice, local government and Party leaders occasionally summoned PAP units to stifle protests.³³¹ Following the changes in 2017 and 2018, local officials must request authority from the center in order to deploy the PAP.³³²

Putting Xi at the Core of Armed Forces Decision-Making

Decision-making over China's security forces is increasingly centered around Xi himself. His rise in power strengthened Party control over the armed forces, ensuring the implementation of military reforms that not only helped improve the PLA's operational capability but also further consolidated his political power in China.³³³ As a 2015 commentary in the PLA newspaper insisted, China's armed forces are responsible for "resolutely responding to the call sent out by Chairman Xi, resolutely executing the requirements put forth by Chairman Xi, and resolutely completing the tasks bestowed upon them by Chairman Xi."³³⁴

*The Border Defense Force and Guards Force were both absorbed by the MPS. The Firefighting Force and the Forestry Force (responsible for fighting forest fires) were transferred to the State Council Emergency Management Department. The Gold Force (responsible for securing gold and other resources) and the Hydropower Force (responsible for managing hydroelectric dams) were designated as "non-active-duty professional teams" and reconstituted as state-owned enterprises under the supervision of the State Council. Joel Wuthnow, "China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform," *China Strategic Perspectives* 14, *Institute for National Strategic Studies* (April 2019): 9, 15–16; CCP Central Committee, *Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Agencies* (中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》), March 21, 2018. Translation.

Emphasizing the Role of the CMC Chairman

The position of CMC chairman is the main source of Xi's authority over China's armed forces. Because the CMC chairman is the only individual to sit on both the Politburo Standing Committee and the CMC, the position gives Xi sole responsibility for coordination between the two most powerful bodies in the Party.³³⁵ Xi has also worked to strengthen the position's authority by placing a renewed emphasis on the "Chairman Responsibility System," a stipulation in the 1982 PRC Constitution that grants ultimate authority for military affairs to the CMC chairman.³³⁶ Under Xi's predecessors Jiang and Hu, the CMC's two uniformed vice chairmen took responsibility for the majority of CMC decision-making on the chairman's behalf in a pattern that became known as the "Vice Chairman Responsibility System."³³⁷ Xi identified this arrangement as a major contributor to a trend of excessive PLA autonomy and has done away with it in favor of concentrating power in his own hands.³³⁸

A 2017 amendment to the PRC Constitution and a 2020 military regulation on political work cemented this status by giving Xi final say in all CMC work and the ability to set the military's agenda on all political and operational issues.*³³⁹ According to Mr. Lee's assessment in his testimony for the Commission, the anecdotal evidence available by cataloguing Xi's military meeting agenda since becoming CMC chairman in 2012 suggests he is particularly involved in decision-making on defining PLA reform milestones and objectives, transforming the Southern Theater Command into a modern joint operations command organization, and modernizing the PLA Army and Navy.³⁴⁰

Personal Ideological Promotion

Xi has also elevated his position by using official speeches, publications, and Party media to paint himself as a great military strategist to whom the armed forces owe complete personal loyalty. Shortly after Xi came to power, a series of high-ranking senior PLA officers made public declarations of loyalty to him, with their statements receiving an unusual level of coverage in Party media.³⁴¹ Beginning in 2016, official sources began using the title "Commander in Chief" in a push to paint Xi as a leader who understands and commands respect from the military, on some occasions even showing him wearing a military uniform while sitting upon a throne-like commander's chair.³⁴² Xi has promulgated a military component of his personal ideology, so-called "Xi Jinping Thought on a Strong Military," and his treatises are required reading for soldiers.³⁴³ State media encourage the armed forces to not only study and implement

* In 2017, the PRC Constitution was amended to stipulate that the CMC chairman "assumes overall responsibility over the work of the [CMC]," indicating that Xi's voice almost certainly has the final say among the seven members of the CMC. Regulations on Party building in the armed forces promulgated in 2020 further stipulate that the CMC chairman must lead and command the national armed forces and determine all major issues of national defense and military building. This description reveals that the role of CMC chairman officially includes both political leadership and command authority over the armed forces. *Xinhua*, "Comprehensively Strengthen the Party Building of the Army in the New Era: Leaders of the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission Answer Reporters' Questions on the Regulations on Party Building in the Military of the Chinese Communist Party" (全面加强新时代军队党的建设——中央军委政治工作部领导就《中国共产党军队党的建设条例》), September 10, 2020. Translation; *Xinhua*, "Xi's Thoughts and 'Absolute' Party Leadership of PLA Written into the Constitution," October 10, 2017.

Xi Jinping Thought on a Strong Military but also appreciate it as a “scientific” theory of military affairs.³⁴⁴ State media reinforces the message that the armed forces owe loyalty to Xi personally, repeatedly insisting that they must “listen to Chairman Xi’s command, be responsible to Chairman Xi, and reassure Chairman Xi.”³⁴⁵ In a speech in January 2017, Xi called upon the PLA to “safeguard the core and follow commands,” a phrase that was incorporated into a formal CMC opinion two months later and made the subject of a campaign to increase loyalty to Xi’s military leadership ahead of the 19th Party Congress that fall.³⁴⁶

Decreasing the Involvement of Other Party Leaders

In addition to elevating himself, Xi has gradually decreased the involvement of other civilian leaders in military affairs.³⁴⁷ The delegation on Hu Jintao’s personal inspection tours* of military organizations included senior civilian CCP members and at least one Politburo member.³⁴⁸ Until 2015, Xi’s inspection delegations also included several civilian CCP leaders, such as Politburo members Wang Huning and Li Zhanshu.³⁴⁹ Since 2015, however, Xi has ceased to include any other Party leaders, and his delegation has consisted entirely of military officers.³⁵⁰ According to Mr. Lee’s testimony before the Commission, the presence of other CCP leaders in the inspection delegations prior to 2015 suggests they previously had some hands-on involvement in military affairs, and their removal was most likely intended to signal to the rest of the Party leadership that Xi is now the only civilian who can be involved in military decision-making.†³⁵¹

Enforcing Control over the Military

Decision-making on the use of China’s armed forces, both military and paramilitary, is designed to ensure the security of the CCP regime. Xi’s experience in Party affairs positions within the PLA and familiarity with the CMC likely gave him insight into the areas where Party control over the PLA had been lacking under previous leadership.‡ The CCP under Xi has consistently and explicitly stat-

*The CCP top leader frequently conducts inspection visits to military organizations. These visits allow the top leader to strengthen his reputation as a military leader by visibly demonstrating interest in PLA affairs and underscore his attention to developments within his military area of responsibility. In addition to this performative function, inspection tours may also help the top leader better understand the situation on the ground. Mark Stokes, Executive Director, Project 2049 Institute, interview with Commission staff, September 21, 2022; Joel Wuthnow, Senior Research Fellow, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, interview with Commission staff, September 21, 2022; Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, “Large and in Charge: Civil Military Relations under Xi Jinping,” in Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, National Defense University, February 22, 2019, 519–555, 538; *PLA Daily*, “Hu Jintao Inspection of Jinan Military Region Emphasizes Not Relaxing Preparations for Military Struggle” (胡锦涛视察济南军区强调不放松军事斗争准备), October 22, 2009. Translation; *Xinhua*, “On the Eve of the Spring Festival Xi Jinping Inspects and Central Theater Command and Expresses New Year Greetings to All of the Officers and Warriors of the People’s Liberation Army, Officers and Police of the People’s Armed Police, Civil Officials of the Armed Forces, and Militia and Reserve Personnel” (习近平春节前夕视察慰问中部战区向全体人民解放军指战员武警部队官兵军队文职人员民兵预备役人员致以新春祝福), January 28, 2022. Translation.

†Mr. Lee argued it is unlikely the change was due to Xi’s personal distrust of any particular leaders, as Xi later elevated both Wang Huning and Li Zhanshu to the elite Politburo Standing Committee in 2017. Roderick Lee, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 5.

‡Xi served on active duty in the military as a secretary in the CMC General Office beginning at the age of 26 in 1979. From the mid-1980s to early 2000s, his official biography lists a series

ed that concentration of authority over the security forces under the CMC and CMC chairman is necessary to ensure the Party remains in control and the security forces remain loyal to it rather than the state or the nation at large.

Political Work in China's Military: The Party Must Command the Gun

Loss of Party control over the armed forces is one of several factors Xi has explicitly identified as having contributed to the fall of the CPSU and the Soviet Union, making it a matter of critical importance under his leadership.³⁵² The November 2021 historical resolution reveals Xi's motivating concern for Party control over the armed forces:

*For a period of time, the Party's leadership over the military was obviously lacking. If this problem had not been completely solved, it would not only have diminished the military's combat capacity, but also undermined the key political principle that the Party commands the gun.*³⁵³

Increased emphasis on political work in the military and paramilitary under Xi's leadership has thus focused on ensuring that the armed forces' loyalty is to the Party and the Party alone.³⁵⁴ In emphasizing the danger of the Party losing its leadership role and control over the PLA, Xi has in part sought to combat discourse on the idea of "nationalization" of the PLA as a national army of the PRC rather than a Party army.³⁵⁵ Under Xi's predecessors, nationalization of the PLA had become a topic of discussion in some PLA circles, which Xi has openly sought to rectify.³⁵⁶

China's military leadership does not perceive a tradeoff between the political reliability and operational capability of its officers.³⁵⁷ Instead of officers being designated either "red" or "expert," according to Mr. Lee's testimony before the Commission, "operational proficiency and political awareness are increasingly intermingled the more senior one becomes," the ideal being to embody what CCP propaganda terms a "double expert."³⁵⁸ According to testimony by James Mulvenon, former director of the Center for Intelligence Research and Analysis at SOS International, personnel choices in the PLA are increasingly "political choices between professional officers."³⁵⁹ In other words, he argues, political criteria are employed to choose among two or more fully qualified professional officers.³⁶⁰ As the military capability and professionalism of the entire PLA have risen, the system has not resulted in widespread promotion of politically reliable people at the expense of professional military competence, as is sometimes supposed.³⁶¹

Personnel Decisions

According to the PRC's Active Military Officer Service Law, the CMC chairman officially appoints and removes all active-duty offi-

of Party affairs positions in the PLA, including as political commissar and Party committee secretary of a reserve unit, in a military garrison, in a military subdistrict at the municipal level, and at the provincial military district level. Finally, in a rare appointment of a civilian senior Party cadre to the powerful position of CMC vice chairman, Xi served for two years on the CMC prior to his appointment to general secretary of the Party and CMC chairman in 2012. *People's Daily*, "Resume of Comrade Xi Jinping" (习近平同志简历), March 2018. Translation.

cers at the division grade (typically senior colonels and major generals) and above.³⁶² This authority means that as CMC chairman, Xi has the sole authority to approve or disapprove all general and flag officer promotions in the People's Armed Forces, a category Mr. Lee estimates has almost certainly numbered in the thousands since Xi became CMC chairman.³⁶³ In his testimony, Mr. Lee noted that while it is unlikely Xi has involved himself in all of these promotions,* it is relatively safe to assume that since taking office he has had a direct say in the promotion of at least all new full generals and admirals in the PLA.³⁶⁴

Anticorruption Campaigns

Xi has used his anticorruption campaign both as a tool to attempt to address the corruption issue and as an implied threat to encourage compliance with his military reform agenda and personal control.³⁶⁵ According to a compilation by the Center on U.S.-China Relations at the Asia Society, at least 62 PLA officers had been removed for corruption by 2018, with 46 of those officers possessing a rank of major general or above.³⁶⁶ The continuous threat of investigation is a potent tool to intimidate or remove officers who might otherwise obstruct reform efforts or show insufficient loyalty to Xi.³⁶⁷ In his testimony before the Commission, Dr. Mulvenon similarly argued that the ever-present threat of replacement via the anticorruption campaign “prevents the development of resistance and factionalism within the PLA.”³⁶⁸ In particular, he assessed that the coercive threat of the anticorruption campaign was instrumental in allowing Xi to achieve such a dramatic reorganization of the PLA, which necessarily generated a lot of opposition from the losers of the reform.³⁶⁹

Xi demonstrated the centrality of anticorruption to his vision of military discipline by raising the bureaucratic status of the investigation authority. In January 2016, the PLA Discipline Inspection Commission, which had been housed in the General Political Department since 1990, was returned to the CMC, giving the inspection organization greater independence from the PLA bureaucracy.³⁷⁰ After this adjustment, CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang reportedly encouraged discipline inspectors to “take advantage of their new standing” within the PLA when investigating PLA officers’ political loyalty, power, and responsibility.³⁷¹ In October 2017, the head of the newly relocated PLA Discipline Inspection Commission was elevated to the rank of a CMC member, further increasing the investigation organization’s authority and acknowledging its heightened political significance.³⁷²

Party Control inside Military Decision-Making

Xi has led a dramatic reorganization of the upper echelons of PLA decision-making, but below the CMC, the basic mechanisms for Party control of the military—political officers, and Party committees—have not changed significantly. Instead of reforming lower Party structures, Xi is reinvigorating political work within

*Mr. Lee assesses that Xi likely delegates some responsibility for such promotional decisions to the director of the CMC Political Work Department, Miao Hua. Roderick Lee, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 9.

Party Control inside Military Decision-Making— Continued

these structures and pressing political officers to focus on learning military affairs to participate more in military decision-making and make political work more relevant to success in war.

Dual Command and the Political Officer: Throughout the PLA, from company to theater command, the PLA continues its longstanding practice known as the “military and political dual-leadership system.”³⁷⁴ Under this system, every unit has two principal officers, a commander and a political officer, who serve as co-equals and share joint responsibility for issuing orders and overseeing daily tasks.³⁷⁵ The roles are designed to be complementary, with the commander responsible for military decisions and the political officer responsible for political and personnel decisions.³⁷⁶ The political officer’s functions combine activities similar to a chaplain, sergeant major, inspector general, judge advocate, human resources officer, social worker, and Party whip. His areas of responsibility range from ideological discipline to political and moral education, military law, soldier wellbeing, and professional development.³⁷⁷

Party Committees: Like the rest of society under CCP rule, the PLA also has Party organizations embedded in each military unit and major staff organization.*³⁷⁸ “This Party committee structure creates a ‘trusted agent’ in the aggregate,” explains Mr. Lee.³⁷⁹ “Instead of having a single individual whom Xi trusts, a collective group of individuals who are promoted based on both political and military affairs traits are responsible for unit control and oversight.”³⁸⁰ The political officer and unit commander usually serve as the secretary and deputy secretary of their unit’s Party committee.³⁸¹

Steady State vs. Wartime Decision-Making: In steady state, commanders direct day-to-day military activities while political officers ensure these operations are conducted in line with political goals.³⁸² In transition to crisis or wartime, Mr. Lee explains, “most of a Party committee’s functions are relatively ‘high-level’ in nature and do not involve the Party committee needing to approve every action made within a unit.”³⁸³ They do, however, have the authority to review in committee any decision an individual leader, such as the commander or political officer, makes on the spot.³⁸⁴

A House Divided? A common PLA slogan, “division of labor [does] not divide the house,” reminds commanders and political officers they have different duties but must work together.³⁸⁵ In 2019, the *PLA Daily* reminded soldiers of the Gutian All-Military Political Work Conference that CMC Chairman Xi personal-

*The term “Party committee” (党委) is used for organizations that are established at the regiment level and above. At the battalion level and in second-level functional and administrative departments of the PLA, the relevant Party organ is called a “grassroots Party committee” (基层党委). At the company level, they are referred to as “Party branches” (党支部). The term “Party small group” (党小组) is used at the platoon level and for ad hoc organizations at any level that are created for a specific purpose and have three or more Party members. Kenneth W. Allen et al., “Personnel of the People’s Liberation Army,” *BluePath Labs* (prepared for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission), November 2022, 17.

Party Control inside Military Decision-Making— *Continued*

ly hosted five years earlier where he raised concerns that some political officers had become useless because they were afraid to speak their voice or insert their hand in military affairs.³⁸⁶ Xi exhorted political officers to get more involved in operations, training, and military command and control so that they could learn to make political work a greater part of military success in wartime. In late 2021, the Ministry of National Defense again raised Xi's exhortations at the Gutian conference, recommending "Meritorious Li Yannian," a new television series about a Korean War political commissar who was an expert in both military and political affairs.³⁸⁷ Despite these continuing efforts, tensions remain that raise questions about the degree to which this political oversight will complicate or slow the PLA's military decision-making. As Mr. Lee cited in testimony to the Commission, a "PLA Navy officer who attended the Rim of the Pacific exercise in 2016" expressed clear frustration with political oversight on military affairs when he "lamented that the PLA's 'nanny command style' was inadequate for modern operations."³⁸⁸

Control over China's Internal Security and the Political-Legal Apparatus

Similar to his efforts to assert dominance over the PLA, Xi has made it a priority since the earliest days of his leadership to control China's domestic public security apparatus.³⁸⁹ In addition to the reforms to China's paramilitary forces detailed above, Xi has dedicated significant attention to reforming elements and overall control of China's political-legal system.³⁹⁰ The political-legal system is the bureaucracy responsible for law enforcement, public security, and domestic coercion in China, including the courts, procuratorates, MPS, Ministry of State Security,* Ministry of Justice, and police academies.†³⁹¹ Changes to the political-legal system under Xi have sought to ensure the strict, hierarchical Party control and political loyalty of the apparatus most directly linked to domestic regime security.³⁹²

Motivation for Enhanced Control over Political-Legal Work

Xi perceives the domestic security apparatus as a foundational guarantor of the Party's control that must remain loyal in all circumstances.³⁹³ His focus on this area most likely reflects an under-

*The MPS is responsible for domestic law enforcement in China, including riot control and the overall maintenance of "social order." The Ministry of State Security is China's main civilian intelligence and counterintelligence agency whose missions include protecting China's national security writ large, securing political and social stability, conducting counterintelligence, and implementing security-related laws. Timothy Heath, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on What Keeps Xi Up at Night: Beijing's Internal and External Challenges*, February 7, 2019, 8–9.

†The Chinese Communist Party Regulations on the Political Legal Work issued in January 2019 define "political-legal units" as "specialized forces engaged in political-legal work under the leadership of the Party, primarily including judicial organs, procuratorial organs, public security organs, national security organs, judicial administrative organs, and other units." *Xinhua*, "CCP Central Committee Publishes 'Chinese Communist Party Regulations on Political-Legal Work'" (中共中央印发《中国共产党政法工作条例》), January 18, 2019. Translation.

standing of the political-legal system as a necessary tool and weapon of the Party and top Party leadership.³⁹⁴ CCP sources commonly refer to the public security apparatus as “the knife,” and Xi has identified that a foundational principle of political-legal work must be “ensur[ing] that the handle of the knife is firmly grasped in the hand of the Party and the people.”³⁹⁵ Regulations on political-legal work issued under Xi’s tenure also make clear that political-legal work is an important channel for the Party’s leadership of so-called “dictatorial functions,”* in other words, the coercive aspects of domestic governance.³⁹⁶ This domestic monitoring and enforcement capability, while theoretically targeted at enemies of the Party-state, can nonetheless be turned even upon the CCP leadership itself.³⁹⁷ Without firm control over this lever of power, Xi would be unable to secure his desired leadership for the Party or for himself in any other policy area.

Nevertheless, upon his rise to power Xi perceived that the handle of the knife had slipped dangerously out of the control of the CCP top leadership.³⁹⁸ Under Hu Jintao, the public security apparatus had enjoyed a significant level of autonomy and policy influence vis-à-vis the CCP top leadership in a manner similar to the military.³⁹⁹ Then Politburo Standing Committee member and head of the Party’s Central Political-Legal Affairs Commission (CPLAC) Zhou Yongkang, for example, possessed a firm grip over the regime’s intelligence and security bureaucracy and became a cautionary tale of the dangers of such independent power.⁴⁰⁰ Zhou was suspected of not only corruption but also conspiring with Bo Xilai against the central Party leadership and attempting to contravene a Politburo Standing Committee consensus to purge the disgraced leader.⁴⁰¹ Corruption and clientelism were also areas of concern.⁴⁰² According to analysis by Christopher Johnson, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, published in conjunction with the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin, Xi perceived that lax leadership by his predecessor had allowed the domestic security apparatus so much leeway as to pose a threat to the cohesion of the Party system itself.†⁴⁰³

* In his work entitled “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” Mao Zedong defined the “people’s democratic dictatorship” as the exercise of “democracy within the people” and “dictatorship over the reactionaries.” He explains that “the people” who support China’s socialist revolution should enjoy political freedoms, whereas the enemies of the revolution should be constrained and oppressed. He argues that this principle is essential for the success of China’s socialist revolution, the welfare of the people, and the survival of the country. The concept of the “people’s democratic dictatorship” is still endorsed by the Chinese government and the CCP today. It is included in Article 1 of the PRC Constitution as one of the core characteristics of the Chinese socialist state. It is also mentioned three times in the opening section of the CCP charter. *Xinhua*, “Charter of the Chinese Communist Party (Amended by the Nineteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, October 24, 2017)” (中国共产党章程 (中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会部分修改, 2017年10月24日通过)), *Communist Party Members Net*, October 28, 2017. Translation; People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China, “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China” (中华人民共和国宪法), *Xinhua*, March 22, 2018. Translation; Mao Zedong, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship” (论人民民主专政), June 30, 1949, in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong: Volume 5* (毛泽东选集: 第五卷), People’s Publisher, 1981, 1468–1482, 1475. Translation.

† A high-level speech by then head of the CPLAC Meng Jianzhu in 2015 elaborates on these concerns, stating, “In recent years, some political and legal affairs leaders have embarked on the road of illegal crimes. The most fundamental reason for this is that there are problems with ideals and beliefs and their values are seriously distorted, breaking the bottom lines of Party discipline and state laws... We must carry out the Party’s political discipline and organizational discipline education in depth, never allow anything to override to the organization, never allow any compromises or choices in implementing the Party Central Committee’s decisions and deployments, never allow the relationship between superiors and subordinates to become personal relationships of dependency, and never allow the formation of cliques.... At present, the anti-cor-

Rewriting the Rules of Political-Legal Work under Xi

The CCP under Xi's leadership has made many organizational and personnel changes to the Party's leadership of political-legal work. The overall goal of these efforts appears to have been centralizing Party control while simultaneously preventing the reemergence of any position powerful enough to challenge the top leadership. Lines of effort have included a realignment of the Party's existing CPLAC and its associated hierarchy;* the subordination of political-legal work to Xi's newly defined national security goals and institutions; an ongoing series of campaigns to ensure loyalty from the system's leaders and personnel; and relentless promotion of Xi's leading role in political-security work.

Reorientation and Subordination of the CPLAC

In contrast to elevating the bureaucratic status of other key Party commissions, Xi lowered the bureaucratic status of the CPLAC even while expanding its areas of authority to centralize Party control. This anomaly was likely intended to prevent any leader of the domestic security apparatus from developing a unique power base. Following Zhou Yongkang's expulsion from the Party, his former portfolio as head of the CPLAC was immediately downgraded from the Politburo Standing Committee level, where it had been since the early 2000s, to the Politburo level.⁴⁰⁴ The demotion would severely limit the ability of any future commission head to contravene the decisions of the top CCP leadership the way Zhou had attempted. The CCP also began to phase out the dual-hatting of local-level political-legal committee heads as the heads of local public security bureaus.⁴⁰⁵ This reversed a practice that had become common since the late 1990s and 2000s and that had allowed the local political-legal organs to play an extremely active role in local domestic security affairs.⁴⁰⁶ With these changes in place, the CPLAC's areas of responsibility could be safely expanded as part of the broad Party-state reorganization effort. In March 2018, the CCP consolidated responsibility for additional channels of political-legal work within the CPLAC by directing it to absorb the majority of the functions of three other Party leading small groups and commissions.⁴⁰⁷ These were the Central Commission on Comprehensive Management of Societal Security, the Central Leading Small Group on Maintaining Stability Work, and the Central Leading Small Group for the Prevention and Handling of Cult Issues.[†]⁴⁰⁸

ruption struggle on the political and legal fronts is still grim. We must not only deeply reflect on the painful lessons of the Zhou Yongkang case, but also thoroughly eliminate the impact of the Zhou Yongkang case." Meng Jianzhu, "Effectively Improve the Ability and Level of Political and Legal Affairs Institutions to Serve the Overall Situation" (切实提高政法机关服务大局的能力和水平), *People's Court Daily*, March 18, 2015. Translation.

*The CPLAC sits atop a hierarchy of lower-level political-legal committees that manage political-legal work at the provincial and local levels. Minxin Pei, "The CCP's Domestic Security Taskmaster: The Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission," *China Leadership Monitor* (September 1, 2021): 3–12.

†The CPLAC absorbed all of the functions of the first two organizations, the Central Commission on Comprehensive Management of Societal Security and the Central Leading Small Group on Maintaining Stability Work. In the case of the third organization, the Central Leading Small Group for the Prevention and Handling of Cult Issues, the CPLAC took on the disbanded group's decision-making responsibilities while the MPS absorbed some of its administrative and implementation functions. The reorganization plan assigned responsibility for information gathering, analysis, and policy implementation to the MPS as a government ministry, whereas the CPLAC as a Party organization was tasked with policy coordination and making policy recommendations

Like other parts of the bureaucracy under Xi, the CPLAC and its associated hierarchy also appear to have been subject to the overall authority of the CNSC and its hierarchy. Following the establishment of the CNSC under Xi's leadership, experts have predicted that the new national security commission may supplant the leadership of the existing political-legal commission over domestic security issues.⁴⁰⁹ While the full details of the relationship between the two Party groups remain unknown, there are several indicators that the political-legal affairs organizations are required to follow the leadership of the CNSC. First, as previously indicated, the head of the CPLAC is currently a Politburo-level position, whereas the head of the CNSC is Xi himself. Second, the last available list of the full membership of the CNSC, which dates from 2017, includes the head of the CPLAC (then Meng Jianzhu) as a member of the CNSC, along with the Minister of Public Security.⁴¹⁰ Third, new regulations released in 2019 require that political-legal work "adhere to the Comprehensive National Security Concept" and explicitly direct lower-level political-legal committees to "implement the decisions and arrangements" of central and local national security commission leadership organizations at every level.⁴¹¹

Personnel Changes

Xi has also gone to great lengths to ensure the loyalty of the political-legal apparatus by replacing most of its leadership, many by means of the anticorruption campaign, with people he trusts.⁴¹² According to Dr. Wu, since taking power in 2012 Xi has presided over at least three purges of the MPS and political-legal apparatus.⁴¹³ The first wave centered around the removal of Zhou Yongkang along with many of Zhou's proteges and much of the leadership of the MPS. According to Dr. Wu, to accomplish this feat so early in his time as general secretary, Xi relied on support from not only Wang Qishan (then in charge of the CCP's Central Discipline-Inspection Committee) but also several other groups of officials both inside and outside the public security apparatus.*⁴¹⁴ Dr. Wu assesses that the ensuing purges in 2018 and 2020 have represented "an ongoing process of power redistribution" among those groups, with each wave bringing to power individuals with closer ties to Xi than those who had come before.⁴¹⁵

The Party under Xi has demonstrated a strong focus on managing and developing the political quality of both the leaders in the system and the rank-and-file public security personnel. A readout of Xi's guiding speech in January 2015 states, "It is necessary to strengthen and improve the leadership of political-legal work; choose

to the CCP Central Committee. CCP Central Committee, *Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Agencies* (中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》), March 21, 2018. Translation.

*These groups were, in order of increasing closeness to Xi: (1) former proteges of Zhou Yongkang who betrayed Zhou in order to seek patronage from Xi, most of whom already had prominent careers in public security, such as Fu Zhenghua and Huang Ming; (2) members of the so-called "Shanghai Gang" of officials with close connections to Jiang Zemin and Zeng Qinghong, most of whom were transferred into the public security system from other areas of the bureaucracy to replace Zhou and his associates, such as Meng Jianzhu and Guo Shengkun; (3) individuals affiliated with Xi allies like Li Zhanshu, such as Zhao Kezhi, who were also transferred into public security from other Party positions; and (4) Xi's longtime associates, such as Wang Xiaohong. Guoguang Wu, "Continuous Purges: Xi's Control of the Public Security Apparatus and the Changing Dynamics of CCP Elite Politics," *China Leadership Monitor*, December 1, 2020, 2-3.

and match well the leadership group of political-legal organizations; continuously raise the ranks' ideological and political quality and ability to perform their duties; [and] cultivate political-legal ranks that are loyal to the party, loyal to the country, loyal to the people, and loyal to the law.”⁴¹⁶ Later guidance from other leaders echoes the same themes, emphasizing the importance of both leaders and the broader ranks below those leaders having strong political qualifications and a good disciplinary record.⁴¹⁷ Several Party sources have mentioned a goal of building the public security forces into a so-called “iron army” that is immune to corruption.⁴¹⁸ A series of recent activities by an organization called the National Public Security Ranks Education and Rectification Leading Small Group and its office confirms this is still an area of attention for the leadership today.⁴¹⁹

Elevation of Xi

Xi's role in remaking and guiding the political-legal apparatus has been heavily emphasized. As in other policy areas, his speeches and instructions are consistently used as benchmarks for the correct policy direction by leaders and organs under him.⁴²⁰ Remarks by the heads of the CPLAC in 2015 and 2019 credit Xi's instructions with “point[ing] out the correct direction” and “provid[ing] a grand blueprint” for political-legal affairs work as well as the guidelines members of the bureaucracy need in order to “do their jobs well.”⁴²¹ The 2019 regulations on political-legal work make implementing Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era the first responsibility of political-legal commissions and committees at all levels.⁴²² In 2021, when CPLAC Secretary General Chen Yixin gave a speech outlining ten “key points” that should serve as a focus for the year ahead, the first goal he highlighted was the promotion of large-scale learning and training activities to “set off an upsurge in the study and implementation of Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law.”⁴²³

Consequences for Security Decision-Making under Xi

Perhaps more than in any other field, the lack of constraints and balances on Xi's authority in the security space grants him immense discretion over the use of China's armed forces. Xi's position at the intersection of military and Party leadership, his restructuring of the PLA and paramilitary forces, and his control over personnel decisions grant him a highly streamlined and personalized command. Consequently, the use and orientation of China's military and paramilitary forces are subject to Xi's personal discretion. There are also features of China's military decision-making system that tend toward micromanagement and potential inefficiency.

Unpredictability in Crisis Management and Escalation Control

This combination of unparalleled authority and wide discretion makes it difficult to reliably predict or influence the decisions Xi will make, particularly in a crisis situation in which he may have less time or desire to confer with other leaders. As an example, Xi's centralization of control and personalization of command in the nu-

clear realm means that should China decide on a launch-on-warning posture,* he alone could have somewhere in the range of ten minutes to make a personal decision about the use of nuclear weapons, a scenario Mr. Lee described in his testimony to the Commission as “incredibly concerning.”⁴²⁴

Xi’s overwhelming authority further complicates crisis situations by decreasing the likelihood that lower-level officials or interlocutors have the authority to adapt to changing situations. In his testimony before the Commission, Dr. Mulvenon expressed concern about the personalization of command under Xi, saying, “If in fact major military decisions require Xi Jinping’s personal approval... rather than an institutional mechanism, that makes crisis management, escalation control, and strategic communications potentially difficult... during the fog of war. It makes it more difficult... to establish credible defense telephone links with what we think are the operational elements of the PLA.”⁴²⁵ Xi’s emphasis on the Chairman Responsibility System likely also gives him great discretion over which or how many subordinates he chooses to consult on major decisions, making it difficult to identify a reliable channel for crisis messaging. In a time-sensitive situation, there is no guarantee Xi will convene the entire CMC, and higher-ranking CMC members such as the CMC vice chairmen may be more likely than the Minister of Defense and other CMC members† to still be consulted.

In this context, the question of information inputs to Xi’s decision-making is paramount. Mr. Lee pointed out that the PLA’s relatively well-developed and technologically supported information flows likely present Xi with access to multiple, diverse sources of information on the same situation at once, including potentially a direct video feed from relevant tactical formations, which he can use to supplement the reports of any subordinates he chooses to consult.⁴²⁶ From this potential abundance of information, Xi has the broad authority to draw his own conclusions and formulate his own decisions absent any predictable filter or intervention from other stakeholders.⁴²⁷

*A launch-on-warning posture is one in which a state’s military would launch nuclear weapons in retaliation for an incoming strike that has been detected but not yet detonated on its territory. Although China does not currently have a launch-on-warning posture, many recent advances in the PLA’s nuclear capabilities could enable a shift to a launch-on-warning posture if desired. (For more on China’s nuclear doctrine, posture, and capabilities, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 3, Section 2, “China’s Nuclear Forces: Moving beyond a Minimal Deterrent,” in *2021 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2021, 340–385; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2021 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2021, 358, 360.)

†Specifically, personalization of command under Xi may restrict the ability of the minister of defense, the currently designated counterpart to the U.S. secretary of defense, to act as a reliable channel to Xi in a crisis scenario. In his testimony, Dr. Wuthnow assessed that Xi’s final decision-making authority means that all CMC members will transmit messages to him at the top of the system, regardless of the messenger’s relative rank on the CMC. This means that in normal noncrisis scenarios, the minister of defense is likely a viable channel for messaging to Xi by virtue of his CMC status and his presence at CMC meetings, as is every CMC member. However, Xi’s emphasis on the Chairman Responsibility System likely means he does not necessarily need to convene the entire CMC. If in a crisis scenario, Xi does not have time or chooses not to convene the entire CMC, the Minister of Defense (currently the third-ranking uniformed member of the CMC, Wei Fenghe) by virtue of his greater distance from Xi, would be a less reliable channel than the CMC vice chairmen. Unlike Minister Wei, both CMC vice chairmen also sit on the Politburo, making them the senior defense and military advisors to the senior-most political leadership of the CCP. Joel Wuthnow, oral testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, January 27, 2022, 225–226. *People’s Daily*, “China’s Important Leaders” (中国政要), 2022. Translation.

Micromanagement of Forces by Senior Leadership

Within China's military there have been longstanding concerns over micromanagement from senior leadership, a trend exacerbated by the centralization of decision-making under Xi and advances in command and control technology. As Mr. Lee explains, although the PLA appears to acknowledge warfighters' need for some level of decision-making autonomy on a theoretical level, the system nonetheless gravitates toward a highly centralized command and control structure.⁴²⁸ The CMC and theater commands both retain the formal authority to engage in "skip echelon"* command of even tactical formations and appear to actually use this capability as a matter of course.⁴²⁹ All theater command joint operations command centers appear to have live video feeds from virtually every weapons platform operating within their areas of responsibility.⁴³⁰ The upper-level leadership's tendency to push down senior officers to the tactical level appears to have become problematic enough to interfere with operations.⁴³¹ To mitigate this interference, the PLA Navy issued new guidance stipulating that single-ship formations could not have a senior officer embarked onboard, which appears to be directed at affording the ship's own commander and political officer a chance to perform their job without excessive oversight.⁴³² According to Dr. Mulvenon's assessment before the Commission, this pervasive culture of micromanagement creates risk aversion at the lower levels of the PLA and results in "paralysis" whenever they are cut off from upper-level command.⁴³³

Militarization of Internal Security Actions

Stronger central control over China's paramilitary forces could potentially also contribute to greater internal instability. The thorough militarization and establishment of central control over the PAP may raise the likelihood that the central government will conceive of domestic societal concerns in military terms and enforce its domestic agenda with military force.⁴³⁴ Local governments' loss of ability to independently deploy the PAP may also result in delays and slower response times to local emergencies.⁴³⁵ Dr. Wuthnow assessed that local governments may hesitate to request approval from the center to deploy the PAP in emergencies for fear of appearing to have lost control of the situation.⁴³⁶

Decision-Making Surrounding a Taiwan Invasion

A decision to take military action over Taiwan is ultimately a political one.⁴³⁷ Xi's preeminent role in China's military decision-making contributes to dangerous uncertainty† in the Taiwan Strait by making it difficult to predict the timing of a potential decision to invade Taiwan. As the Commission noted in its 2021 Annual Report, factors such as a misreading of U.S.

*"Skip-echelon" command refers to a practice in which high-level command authorities bypass intermediate command levels to directly command lower-level units.

† For more on decision-making surrounding a Taiwan invasion and recent changes to the military balance generating uncertainty in the Taiwan Strait, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Chapter 4, "A Dangerous Period for Cross-Strait Deterrence: Chinese Military Capabilities and Decision-Making for a War over Taiwan," in *2021 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2021, 387–438.

Decision-Making Surrounding a Taiwan Invasion— *Continued*

policy, a belief that a U.S. threat to intervene is not credible, or a focus on Xi's personal ambitions could all contribute to a deterrence failure whereby the CCP leadership orders the PLA to attack Taiwan.⁴³⁸ The structural changes Xi has undertaken to make military decision-making responsive to his direction mean that his personal beliefs and assessments on these matters could have an outsized or potentially even deciding role in a decision to invade. Xi possesses broad authority over the military situation by nature of his position as chairman of a restructured CMC, and he is the only individual on the Politburo Standing Committee with a military portfolio.⁴³⁹ Compounding this risk, it is uncertain whether the PLA will truthfully report to Xi about their capabilities and readiness to invade Taiwan, since it may be politically dangerous to admit to the top leader that the capabilities are not ready after being the focus of PLA modernization efforts for so long.⁴⁴⁰

Implications for the United States

In the 20 years prior to General Secretary Xi, networks of top leaders and their proteges deliberated policy choices, and an array of interest groups contributed to decision-making on key policies. Xi has claimed a decisive role for himself in formulating economic, foreign, and security policy. This reversal from the increasing institutionalization, state bureaucratic control, and consensus leadership of his predecessors back to central leadership by Party organization—with Xi at the center of most decision-making bodies—has several implications for how the United States should manage its competition with China.

The elevation of Xi's personalistic rule means U.S. policymakers can confidently interpret any decision articulated by Xi as sure to galvanize change in China's policy direction. Because of Xi's overwhelming authority, the substance of policies directly affiliated with him by name or through his public involvement is relatively unlikely to be subject to major reinterpretation, even if public messaging around them changes slightly. This may afford a degree of predictability in China's policy stance, but it also underscores that Xi has a uniquely powerful role in economic, foreign, and security decision-making. Absent avenues for communication with Xi and his immediate advisers, the United States may face increased risk.

Because of China's structure as a unified Party-state and the dramatic recentralization of Party control that has occurred over the last decade, effective diplomatic engagements and communication with China depend upon developing contact with the people within China's system who hold key Party positions and through those have the authority to make recommendations and influence policy. This requires looking beyond the government organs that most closely match the United States' own system and focusing on the positions of influence one holds in the Party structure. The central management of policymaking by the Party apparatus under Xi means that

lower-level government interlocutors from State Council ministries likely do not possess great ability to innovate or make compromises in negotiation. Decisions to adjust course on China's policy choices most likely must be initiated or approved by either Xi or potentially the head of a relevant Party commission.

Similarly, Xi's unparalleled authority and wide discretion on military affairs make it difficult to reliably predict or influence the decisions he will make or which interlocutors he will involve in decisions. This is particularly the case in a crisis situation, when he may have less time or desire to confer with other leaders before making a decision. It also means external pressure can only be effective if faithfully conveyed to key Party decision-making bodies for consideration. Typically high-sounding state positions like minister of foreign affairs and minister of defense are a full step away from the Party leaders making decisions in their areas of responsibility.

The recentralization of decision-making power within the CCP under Xi's leadership accompanies tighter CCP supervision of the entire Party-state bureaucracy to ensure adherence with Xi's policy choices. As a result, the CCP can ensure rapid mobilization of resources to advance Xi's policy objectives and execution of his decisions, but it may also limit the CCP's ability to correct its policy mistakes or adjust course. This inability to adjust course regardless of economic and security implications poses a challenge to U.S. strategic planning and responses. This may be particularly relevant in late 2022, when the CCP will reshuffle its leadership. Economic headwinds buffeting the Chinese economy are occurring just as Xi prepares to extend his leadership over the CCP at the 20th Party Congress. This politically sensitive year may push Xi to dismiss the economic costs of his policy choices as he looks to protect his position.

Finally, even though the state bodies have always been led by CCP officials and subject to Party guidance, China's policy increasingly grows out of Party structures and under the auspices of Party leaders who are concerned with ensuring the Party's continued supremacy. Effective assessments of China's strategic intent must take into account the worldview and organizational limitations of the CCP as well as the material objectives the Party judges might best suit "China" as a whole. Furthermore, because all major policy decisions made by Xi are now couched in uncompromising national security terms, the United States and other countries seeking to defend their own interests in interactions with China should anticipate and plan for vocal or even coercive retaliation against actions the CCP is likely to interpret as harmful to its interests.

Appendix: The CCP's 2022 20th National Congress

Introduction

- **Party Congress Overview:** The CCP's National Congress, usually referred to simply as the "Party Congress," convenes every five years to determine the leadership positions within the CCP.*⁴⁴¹ As of this report's writing, the CCP's 20th Party Congress is scheduled to begin on October 16, 2022.⁴⁴² The event will determine key players in the Party system and set the tone and agenda for China's policymaking for at least the next five years.⁴⁴³
- **Xi's Intentions for the 20th Party Congress:** At this year's 20th Party Congress, General Secretary Xi likely will seek to extend his leadership of the CCP, place additional individuals he trusts in positions of power, further elevate his political profile through amendments to the Party charter, further entrench his policy agenda through speeches and high-level documents, and continue the process of adjusting institutional arrangements of power within the Party.⁴⁴⁴

Party Congress Process

- **Sequence of Events:** The roughly 2,300 delegates † participating in the Party Congress will convene in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.⁴⁴⁵ The delegates will select the new CCP Central Committee and the Central Committee for Discipline Inspection in a modestly competitive process.‡⁴⁴⁶ When the selection process is complete, a list of the new Central Committee Members and Alternate Members will be distributed and circulated to the media.§⁴⁴⁷

Immediately following the conclusion of the Congress, usually on the following day, the newly selected Central Committee con-

*The turnover of CCP positions at the Party Congress is only one of the two major events that determine the national leadership of China's Party-state system. It is followed by the turnover of state positions in the meeting of the National People's Congress in the next spring. Thus, the process of leadership turnover begun at the 20th Party Congress in the fall of 2022 will not be completed until the conclusion of the National People's Congress in March 2023. Yew Lun Tian, "Factbox: How China's Communist Party Congress Works," *Reuters*, October 14, 2022; Susan Lawrence and Mari Lee, "China's Political System in Charts: A Snapshot before the 20th Party Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, November 24, 2021, 23.

†According to Xinhua, delegates represent 38 provinces and other provincial-level entities (autonomous regions, centrally administered municipalities, and special administrative regions), certain central authorities, the central financial sector, and Beijing-based centrally administered state-owned enterprises. The election process for delegates includes five steps Xinhua describes as "the nomination of candidates by Party members; a nominee review; public notification of the candidates for feedback; candidate shortlists; and the final vote in each electoral unit." *Xinhua*, "How CPC Elects Delegates to Upcoming Party Congress," April 23, 2022.

‡At the CCP's last Party Congress in October 2017, delegates selected 204 candidates out of a list of 222 for full membership on the Central Committee. Susan Lawrence and Mari Lee, "China's Political System in Charts: A Snapshot before the 20th Party Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, November 24, 2021, 9–10.

§According to Susan Lawrence, specialist in Asian Affairs at the Congressional Research Service, if Xi's name is included in this list of Central Committee Members, it is an indication he will likely be selected for a third term as CCP general secretary, as the position of general secretary can only be held by a member of the Central Committee. If Xi's name does not appear on this list, it is an advance indication that he will not retain the position of general secretary. This could mean either that he is expected to step down entirely or that he will take a different approach to remaining in power that does not require him to be a member of the Central Committee. This was the approach taken by Jiang Zemin in 2002 when he relinquished the position of general secretary to Hu Jintao but retained the position of CMC chairman. Susan Lawrence, remarks at "Toward Xi's Third Term: China's 20th Party Congress and Beyond," January 20, 2022, 29.

venes its first plenary session.⁴⁴⁸ It is at this meeting that the new Politburo, Politburo Standing Committee, general secretary, and CMC are selected.⁴⁴⁹ After the conclusion of the Central Committee's first plenary session, the newly selected Politburo Standing Committee, headed by the general secretary, have in the past been revealed in rank order at a live, televised press conference.⁴⁵⁰

- **Indicators of Xi's Influence on the Process:** At the 17th and 18th Party Congresses in 2007 and 2012, Hu Jintao's Administration conducted straw polls for Central Committee members to express their opinions on candidates for the Politburo.⁴⁵¹ Although the results of these polls were secret and nonbinding, they reportedly did influence the ultimate selection of Politburo members.⁴⁵² At the 19th Party Congress, by contrast, Xi replaced straw polls with face-to-face consultations.⁴⁵³ Given an emphasis in Party media on the delegates' need to uphold Xi's position as the core of the Central Committee and the Party, Xi may have used his influence to adjust the process in his favor in the runup to the 20th Party Congress.⁴⁵⁴

Outcomes to Watch in 2022

- **Xi's Position and Title:** The most visible and consequential outcome of the 20th Party Congress will be a determination of Xi's status as the top leader of the CCP. Xi is widely expected to break with recent precedent and remain at the head of the CCP beyond the 20th Party Congress,* potentially securing a third term as CCP general secretary. Some analysts have even suggested Xi may use the occasion of the 20th Party Congress to claim the position of "CCP chairman," which was abolished shortly after the death of Mao Zedong.⁴⁵⁵ Any continuation of Xi's leadership would likely presage a continuation and intensification of his existing policy agenda. His resignation or removal would mark a significant shift in China's political landscape.
- **Succession:** In the event Xi remains the Party's top leader, another important outcome will be whether he identifies one or more potential successors. At the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi broke with recent precedent by not indicating any presumptive successors.†⁴⁵⁶ Continued silence on this issue at the 20th Party Congress would intensify existing concerns about the potential for instability in the hypothetical event of Xi's untimely demise or departure from power.⁴⁵⁷ It may also provide clues into Xi's intended tenure at the top of the system or his level of confidence in his political control.‡

*The position of CCP general secretary does not have an explicit term limit, but Xi's two immediate predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, served only two five-year terms. By this precedent, Xi, who became general secretary in 2012, would be expected to step down at the 20th Party Congress in 2022. Susan Lawrence and Mari Lee, "China's Political System in Charts: A Snapshot before the 20th Party Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, November 24, 2021, 11.

†Xi was identified alongside Li Keqiang as one of Hu Jintao's two presumptive successors at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, which began Hu's second term as general secretary. Hu was similarly anointed as the "heir apparent" to his predecessor Jiang Zemin in 1992. Congressional Research Service, "China's 17th Communist Party Congress, 2007: Leadership and Policy Implications," *EveryCRSReport.com*, December 5, 2007; Cheng Li, "China: Riding Two Horses at Once," *Brookings Institution*, October 23, 2007.

‡The meaning of this decision could be interpreted multiple ways. A decision not to designate any successors could be interpreted as a signal of Xi's confidence and his intention

- **Appointments:** Appointments to the CCP's Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee will likely reveal key supporters of the CCP top leader. Assessing the level of adherence to informal retirement and promotional norms for these senior positions could also provide clues about the top leader's political capital to advance his allies.
 - **Politburo Standing Committee:** Most new appointments to the Politburo Standing Committee have historically come from the ranks of the previous Politburo.⁴⁵⁸ From within the Politburo, male, nonmilitary members below the prevailing retirement age have accounted for most of the promotions.*⁴⁵⁹ Appointments at the 20th Party Congress that do not conform to these trends would be particularly notable. In particular, younger leaders "helicoptered" to the Politburo Standing Committee without first serving on the Politburo are relatively likely to be targeted for serving in a top leadership position in the future. For example, Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, and Li Keqiang were all elevated from the Central Committee to the Politburo Standing Committee in this way in 1992 and 2007.⁴⁶⁰
 - **Politburo:** Most new appointments to the Politburo have historically been members of the previous Central Committee.⁴⁶¹ A few individuals have also been elevated to the Politburo directly from the lower-ranking position of Central Committee Alternate Member, skipping the intermediary step of Central Committee Member.⁴⁶² At Xi's last Party Congress in 2017, two new Politburo members came from outside the Central Committee entirely, and both had personal ties to Xi.⁴⁶³ Any further promotions of Central Committee Alternate Members or individuals without experience in the Central Committee at the 20th Party Congress would be noteworthy.
- **Retirement Ages:** Because expected retirement ages for CCP leadership positions† are informal norms that have been adjusted and manipulated by top leaders over time, appointments that contravene these prevailing norms are notable when they occur. At the 20th Party Congress, the selection of any individual aged 68 or above to serve on the Politburo or Politburo Standing Committee likely indicates a particular interest in

to remain China's top leader beyond the 21st Party Congress in 2027. Conversely, even if Xi does plan to step down in 2027, he may still refrain from publicly anointing a successor if he has concerns that doing so could provide a platform for that individual to challenge him prematurely. A decision to appoint a successor or successors could be a sign that Xi feels pressure from other leaders to identify an end date to his rule, or it could indicate he is confident enough in his political control that the identification of an eventual successor does not threaten his position in the interim.

*No woman has ever served on the Politburo Standing Committee. There are also very few recent historical cases of uniformed military officers in the Politburo moving up to the Politburo Standing Committee level. Susan Lawrence and Mari Lee, "China's Political System in Charts: A Snapshot before the 20th Party Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, November 24, 2021, 13; Joseph Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics*, Cambridge, 2021, 79–80; Alice Miller, "Projecting the Next Politburo Standing Committee," *Hoover Institution*, March 1, 2016, 1, 4–5, 7.

†At the 15th Party Congress in 1997, the age limit to serve on the Politburo was 69 (with individuals aged 70 or older expected to retire). Since the 16th Party Congress in 2002, the age limit has been 67 (with no individuals aged 68 or older continuing to serve). Susan Lawrence and Mari Lee, "China's Political System in Charts: A Snapshot before the 20th Party Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, November 24, 2021, 11; Alice Miller, "Projecting the Next Politburo Standing Committee," *Hoover Institution*, March 1, 2016, 1.

that individual by the top leader. Similarly, a lowering of the retirement age may suggest a desire by the top leader to prevent the advancement of one or more individuals within the age band disqualified by the change.

- **Party Charter:** In the past, the CCP has used the occasion of the Party Congress to add references to the top leaders' personal contributions to Party doctrine into the CCP Charter.*⁴⁶⁴ Xi's signature contribution, Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, and BRI were included in the Party charter at the 19th Party Congress in 2017.⁴⁶⁵ Any additional changes that highlight the status of Xi's contributions would signal a further elevation of his personal status in the Party.⁴⁶⁶
- **Speeches and Reports:** The CCP's political work report† is an extremely important indicator of the new leadership's policy priorities that sets the tone for the next five years.⁴⁶⁷ After the conclusion of the Party Congress, speeches and public statements by newly selected CCP leaders are also important to observe. In the event Xi retains his leadership of the Party, the level of emphasis his major initiatives and policy slogans receive in these high-level statements will provide clues about his political standing and intentions following the Party Congress.

*Similar adjustments to the text of the PRC Constitution are generally made at the National People's Congress the following spring.

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