



A new model of (old) leadership in China by Brad Glosserman and Denny Roy

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Since Mao Zedong died in 1976, power in China has slowly decentralized. Deng Xiaoping's reforms promoted the lifting of the hand of the state from the economy while ultimate authority within the Chinese Communist Party has become more dispersed. Part of this process is generational: no Chinese leader has enjoyed the authority of either Mao or Deng and in its place collective rule has become the norm.

The ascendance of Xi Jinping to the top position in China has challenged those trajectories. During his short period in office, Xi has brought back executive authority, serving as secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party, president of the PRC, chairman of the Central Military Commission, and as an *ex officio* member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo. If that resume wasn't impressive enough, he has also claimed the chairs of two groups established at the Third Plenum of the CCP, held last fall: the National Security Commission and the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms. Those gavels go along with the two older Leading Small Groups he also chairs, one on Foreign Affairs and the other on Taiwan Affairs. He is chairing yet another new group to oversee military reform. Observers see Xi's hand in economic affairs as well, usurping in many ways the role traditionally held by the prime minister. *Xinhua* reported that he chaired a leading group of financial and economic affairs, and described him as its director, a position usually held by the premier.

This consolidation of power is impressive but Xi's authority is also being boosted by his anti-corruption campaign. Record numbers of party members – tens of thousands – are being disciplined and prosecuted for misconduct. Senior officials, referred to as “tigers” in the media, are being hunted as well, including senior PLA figures previously thought untouchable. The country waits with baited breath to see if Xi will take down a former Politburo Standing Committee member, a position long considered immune from investigation.

The drive to purge the party of its corruption cancer at its core – and the fear that the initiative is as much aimed at political opponents as corrupt party members – has prompted many bureaucrats and officials to lower their heads and withdraw from decision making in an attempt to ensure that they don't attract attention. There is a marked increase in suicides among officials. In this environment, such an activist leader can be even more assertive and Xi seems to relish the opportunity.

The desire to centralize authority is also evident in the government's pursuit of advocates of transparency. Rather than seeing them as erstwhile allies in the anti-corruption effort, the government has gone after them as doggedly as it has corrupt officials. Plainly, Xi wants to retain control of the anti-corruption campaign, in particular who it targets.

This is consistent with the effort to assert tighter control over the media, both in broadcast and print, and the internet. Analysts speak of unprecedented censorship and oversight in the last year. It may not be a coincidence that Xi also chairs a new small group that oversees internet security.

Some argue that Xi's “new authoritarianism” is a prerequisite to economic reform: he has to shore up his left flank from attacks by the old guard. Others worry about an old-fashioned power grab, in which Xi isolates, marginalizes, and ultimately crushes any challenge to his authority.

Whatever his ultimate aim, Xi's support for reform has very clear limits. Cleaning up the party is intended to rehabilitate and legitimate the CCP, not loosen its grip on China's politics.

How should outsiders feel about what is happening in China?

Elements of Xi's program might improve governance in China. In principle, the anti-corruption campaign could lighten the burden imposed on the Chinese people resulting from unjust treatment by avaricious officials. It reflects a degree of increased, if indirect, accountability of the ruling party to the public. And if Xi uses his accumulated power to break through the resistance of special interest groups and successfully transform China's economy (which former Premier Wen Jiabao called “unstable, unbalanced, uncoordinated, and unsustainable”) to a stable and sustainable maturity with more reliance on domestic consumption rather than exports, then he would bless both his people and the global economy.

However, Xi does not seem interested in promoting the liberal values that Americans and many friends in the region believe are conducive to justice, prosperity, and peace. His accumulation of power represents a step back toward the dictatorial paramount leadership of the Mao era –ironically, an inclination that got Bo Xilai in trouble. Still, there is little danger of a return to a cult of personality in China and events as calamitous as the Cultural Revolution are extremely unlikely. China has changed too much. The appropriate analog for Xi is more Putin than Mao.

A selective purge of corrupt officials, combined with continued crackdowns on dissent, may not be enough to satisfy the demands of an increasingly empowered and savvy civil society, however. The CCP's domestic insecurity is likely to continue during Xi's tenure, which means continued

risk of Chinese overreaction to a perceived challenge to China's dignity by foreigners.

A relatively high concentration of power in a paramount leader might increase consistency and predictability in Chinese foreign policy-making, simplifying the task of reaching agreement on how to achieve and maintain a stable peace as China becomes the region's second great power. There is only one guy we need talk to, Xi Jinping. But any advantage is lost if he insists China's vital interests require encroaching on other states' vital interests. And the likelihood of an intemperate foreign policy is greater if a smaller number of people are in charge, with a one-man dictatorship being the worst case (well exemplified by Pyongyang).

If Xi's foreign policy is an extension of his domestic political agenda, outsiders may be unqualified to judge whether it is successful. Based on China's external interests, however, Xi seems to have walked China into the trap that Deng Xiaoping warned about: alarming neighbors into security cooperation against China before the difficult task of Chinese economic development is completed.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.