Beyond China’s Black Box

Five Trends Shaping Beijing’s Foreign and Security Policy Decision-Making Under Xi Jinping

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Executive Summary

China’s foreign and security policymaking apparatus is often described as a metaphorical black box about which analysts know little. That is true to an extent, but at the same time, it is possible to develop a better understanding of the people, institutions, processes, and pressures that go into making China’s policies toward the world during Xi’s “new era,” that is, his time as the country’s top leader. This report pursues that objective by identifying five major trends mostly internal to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) party-state system that shape its foreign and security policymaking. In addition, the paper describes the effects that each trend generates, from bureaucratic incentives to behavioral patterns.

The first trend is personalization of the system around Xi. It reduces the influence of various interest groups and therefore the need to bargain with and among them, raises the prospect of groupthink among the loyalists Xi has surrounded himself with, and potentially increases the importance of achieving certain goals for China on Xi’s watch. In addition, Xi’s centrality creates a major management bottleneck that could hamper the system during even brief absences.

The second trend is empowering the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the state. That trend has made more officials into policy-implementers rather than policymakers, even on issues below the level of strategy. It has also increased central demands for ideological activities, such as Xi Jinping Thought study sessions. At the same time, while the leadership wants to improve coordination and might be making some progress, it stops short of actions that could allow government organs to coordinate horizontally if doing so might plausibly jeopardize the center’s control.

The third trend is domestic policy headwinds and the search for alternative forms of political legitimacy for the CCP. This creates two contradictory pressures: China’s reaching out and trying to improve ties with the world, and its turn to an assertive and at times even aggressive form of nationalism to counteract stalling economic growth. It also dents the power and influence China gained through its rapid rise and its role as a massive market driving global economic growth.

The fourth trend is further elevation of regime security over other concerns. This trend negatively affects Beijing’s ties with foreign countries by worsening the experience of foreigners visiting and living in China, exporting repressive political ideas and techniques to the world, and complicating how China’s foreign and security bureaucracy interacts with its counterparts.

The fifth and final trend is diplomatic and military assertiveness and seeking an active global leadership role, which feeds a self-reinforcing cycle of growing tensions, requires PRC diplomats to shoehorn any activities into Xi’s marquee frameworks, and leads Beijing to build out structures of an alternative international order.

Examining these trends helps illuminate the macro pressures shaping China’s foreign and security policy decision-making. Still, aspects of how the party-state makes decisions about its foreign and security policies—“known unknowns”—remain particularly opaque. These include information flows to senior leaders, the dynamic among Xi and his top advisors, and the structure and frequency of important meetings. More knowledge in those areas might shed light on larger questions related to whether there are informal constraints on Xi’s power and how Xi is thinking about eventual transfer of power.

To better understand and respond to the intricacies of China’s foreign and security policy decision-making, the United States and like-minded partners should:

- Recognize that Xi’s personal style and preferences are now the dominant factor shaping China’s foreign and security policies—but how that reality manifests will continue to evolve.
- Track how trends shaping China’s foreign and security policy decision-making might affect the country’s various bureaucratic institutions differently.
- Anticipate uncoordinated PRC actions, such as the 2023 spy balloon incident, as well as policies characterized by drift followed by rapid shifts because they reflect structural features of the system.
- Prepare for deepening policy contradictions alongside continued assertive nationalism from Beijing.
- Prioritize direct diplomatic interactions with Xi.
- Formally compare assessments of the PRC system with allies and partners.
- Develop contingency plans for different leadership succession scenarios.
Introduction

China’s growing power and assertiveness in East Asia, the Indo-Pacific, and around the world has increased the importance of understanding how Beijing’s foreign and security policymaking apparatus functions. Decisions made in China increasingly reverberate around the world, whether it is military pressure targeting Taiwan or Chinese fishing fleets trolling off the coast of South America. However, insights about which factors and actors truly shape Beijing’s foreign and security policies have become seemingly harder to find. Analysts can observe from the outside that an amalgam of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organs and People’s Republic of China (PRC) state bodies—often short-handed as the “party-state”—shape decision-making processes. And CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping reigns from the top as the ultimate authority.

Analysts frequently characterize what happens within that system, though, as a metaphorical “black box” wherein we do not know how decisions are made. Even senior U.S. officials with access to classified information confess to a lack of knowledge about how Beijing makes foreign and security policies. As former U.S. Defense Secretary and Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates told one reporter, “Our intelligence on [China’s] military capabilities and on their economy is pretty good. Our intelligence on what goes on behind closed doors, at the party leadership level, is . . . a very, very hard target.” Those descriptions are accurate to a degree. There are many things outside observers do not and cannot know relative to more transparent political systems such as those in liberal democracies.

At the same time, it is possible to develop a better understanding of the people, institutions, processes, and pressures that go into making China’s policies toward the world during Xi’s “new era,” that is, since he became leader in November 2012. This report proceeds by elucidating the five trends and how their effects shape China’s foreign and security policy decision-making. They are (1) personalization of the system around Xi, (2) empowering the party over the state, (3) domestic policy headwinds and the search for alternative forms of political legitimacy, (4) elevation of regime security over other concerns, and (5) diplomatic and military assertiveness and seeking an active global leadership role. Next, the report details the “known unknowns” of China’s foreign and security policymaking apparatus in the hope of adding rigor to the discussion of what specifically analysts want to find by opening the black box. Finally, the report offers policy recommendations for the United States and like-minded allies and partners seeking a better understanding of the PRC system both to interpret and shape Beijing’s behavior.

Trend 1: Personalization of the System around Xi

Xi has accrued and centralized power around himself to a degree not seen since the PRC’s founding leader, Mao Zedong. He has done so by seizing the key levers of power and enmeshing himself into CCP ideology. Xi holds all three of the main positions at the apex of China’s party-state system: general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, chairman of the Central Military Commission, and president of the PRC state. He orchestrated the removal of presidential term limits from the country’s constitution in March 2018 and sailed past informal norms confining the CCP general secretary to two five-year terms in October 2022.

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At that same meeting, Xi stacked the CCP’s 24-member Politburo and its seven-member Standing Committee with loyalists. By making those moves, Xi completed the political evisceration of rival factions that started early in his tenure through an expansive anti-corruption campaign. These include the Communist Youth League faction of former CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao and former Premier Li Keqiang and even Xi’s fellow “princelings” descended from the PRC’s founding political leadership.

Xi has also managed to entrench himself at the center of CCP ideology through a progressive series of actions. In October 2016, the CCP recognized Xi as its “core,” a powerful designation that had been retired in 2002, something it noted as “vitally important” for the country and the party. In October 2017, Xi’s eponymous “thought” was incorporated into the CCP constitution, then into China’s state constitution in March 2018. In November 2021, for only the third time in more than a century of existence, the party published a “historical resolution,” which devoted more than half of its space to affirming Xi’s policies. In October 2022, the CCP adopted a concept known as the “two establishments” that formally established Xi as the core of the CCP and established “Xi Thought” as its guiding ideology. Concepts like these can get arcane and even nonsensical to observers who are not immersed in party-speak. But they matter because they help Xi tie himself to the party, both as a man and as an ideological agenda, and try to make the two indistinguishable and thus beyond reproach. They also provide a barometer of Xi’s grip on power.

In addition, Xi—no doubt aided by legions of party theorists and ghostwriters—has produced tomes of Xi Thought on topics ranging from socialism and culture to diplomacy and strengthening the military. Such formal designations help solidify Xi’s authority in each domain. And he has mandated that people throughout Chinese society spend long hours studying their contents. The intensity of those campaigns can also be seen through metrics such as the number of times Xi has appeared on the cover of the People’s Daily, whether in pictures, headlines, or bylines.

**EFFECTS**

Xi’s personalization of power has several important effects on China’s foreign and security policymaking. The first is that it reduces the influence of various interest groups—whether members of a potential collective leadership group, rival elite factions, government organs, or state-owned enterprises—and therefore the need to bargain with and among them. Next, Xi’s placement of loyalists in top leadership positions raises the prospect of groupthink where like-minded officials reinforce each other’s analyses and, often, their blind spots and biases too. It also raises the risk that handpicked officials can wash out quickly because they have not been stress-tested for the rigors of their positions over the course of long careers. This appears to have been the case for former State Councilor and Foreign Minister Qin Gang, who was purged from his positions after just six months. Or they simply struggle to attain the knowledge and stature of their more experienced predecessors.
Xi’s consolidation of control over the system also potentially increases the relative importance of personalized or legacy issues related to Xi the man, as opposed to some more objective, impersonal view of China’s national interests. Xi has aimed to shorthand the party’s history as such: under Mao the country stood up, under Deng Xiaoping the country got rich, and under Xi the country is becoming strong. Xi is therefore focused on securing his legacy in the pantheon of PRC leaders as much as securing China’s interests in the abstract, which potentially has critical relevance for Taiwan.

In addition, Xi’s centrality creates a major management bottleneck that could hamper the system in his absence. Notably, Xi’s personal diplomacy mattered a great deal when, in his early years as China’s leader, he traveled abroad more often than any previous Chinese leader. That streak stopped abruptly when Xi stayed home for more than 1,000 days during the coronavirus pandemic. It is now likely harder for Xi to travel since he has taken a more direct role in overseeing nearly every aspect of the Chinese system, which creates the possibility of him becoming overwhelmed even when he is not traveling. Xi’s advancing age also will become a bigger factor over time; he will turn 71 on June 15. In addition, Xi’s staff are hyper-focused on his personal image and want to make sure nothing even remotely embarrassing happens to him overseas—particularly encounters with the press or protestors. Finally, Xi’s practice of personal diplomacy appears erratic at times, such as when he abruptly skipped a planned speech at the August 2023 BRICS conference. Those types of incidents sow confusion and abruptly force foreign counterparts to engage with lower-level leaders instead of Xi himself.

### Trend 2: Empowering the Party over the State

With himself as the “core,” Xi has also altered China’s party-state system to empower the party at the expense of the state. Some have described this a “north-south war” between two separate parts of Zhongnanhai, China’s leadership compound: the south courtyard that houses the central organizations of the CCP; and the north courtyard where the State Council’s main offices sit. In 2018, as part of a slate of organizational shifts, China created the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC) to boost the party’s control over foreign policy. The CFAC, which is led by Xi, upgraded its predecessor organization, the Leading Small Group on Foreign Affairs Work, to increase the overall capacity and bureaucratic power of the CCP’s role in foreign policymaking.

Beijing has also enhanced the role of the party’s de facto foreign ministry, the International Department, which handles relations with foreign political parties, as well as the international operations of the United Front Work Department, which Xi has referred to as a “magic weapon.” The fact that the International Department’s Minister, Liu Jianchao, is reportedly being considered as the country’s next foreign minister provides another proof point for the CCP’s ascendancy in managing China’s relations with the outside world. In addition, the CCP has conducted several major party conferences on foreign affairs topics. Those are rare meetings where party leadership provides “top-level design” for the policy area it governs. These include a major meeting on periphery diplomacy in October 2013 and three Central Foreign Affairs Work Conferences in November 2014, June 2018, and December 2023. Xi’s predecessors each held only one such conference. Official media said the most important outcome of the 2018 meeting was that it “established the guiding position of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy” and of the 2023 meeting that “building a community with a shared future for mankind” was its core tenet.

As for the military, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has always been the party’s force rather than the state’s. But Xi has underscored his control over that body—and, by extension, the party’s control over the military—through his emphasis on the “Chairman’s Responsibility System” within the Central Military Commission (CMC) that commands the PLA. Xi also made himself commander-in-chief of the PLA’s Joint Operations Command Center. Revisions to the country’s national defense law that went into effect in January 2021 further formalized the party’s tighter control over the military. All these moves to bolster the CCP’s formal power over the Chinese state illustrate that Xi is different from Mao. Instead of weaponizing a personality cult against party-state bureaucracy, Xi strengthens party’s institutions so he can harness them to his own goals, all while making himself synonymous with party rule.
To be sure, Xi has also boosted the resources and capacity of the foreign policy bureaucracy, but mostly as policy-implementers rather than policymakers. To name just a few examples, China’s foreign affairs budget grew more than 60 percent from 2013 to 2023. In March 2018, the leadership again bestowed on the foreign minister the additional title of state councilor, a rank above minister that gives him more power in the system, after many years of foreign ministers not having that title. China simultaneously announced a plan to move the state media apparatus directly under the control of the CCP’s propaganda department and consolidate its various arms into the “Voice of China” to “enhance [the CCP’s] international broadcasting capacity.” Beijing has also worked to train and then place Chinese citizens in key positions within international organizations, especially UN bodies.

**EFFECTS**

This trend could affect foreign and security policy decision-making in several ways. First, while there is never a clear line between policymakers and policy-implementers, tighter leadership control has made more officials into implementers rather than makers, even on issues below the level of strategy. As a result, it can be hard for officials from China’s foreign and security apparatus to interact with their counterparts overseas. They have less room to speak authoritatively or retain much pragmatic flexibility.

In theory, this “top-level design” approach creates unified, coherent decision-making and execution and cuts down on any entities freelancing or going rogue. In practice, however, strict enforcement of central control often begets one of two outcomes: either paralysis as officials try to avoid a wrong move by not moving at all, or overzealous implementation to ensure officials cannot be accused of soft-pedaling orders or to curry favor with superiors. The trend of PRC diplomats acting as “wolf warriors” by making caustic statement illustrates the latter tendency.

Second, additional bureaucratic and technical capacity is likely being offset by increasing demands to conduct ideological activities such as Xi Thought study sessions. One report from the U.S. investment firm BlackRock said its employees in China spent a third of their time studying such material. Presumably, workers employed by the state shoulder a similar, if not greater, burden. “Political workers” in PRC organizations, including political commissars in the PLA, lead and enforce study. That sometimes leads to a personnel dilemma of whether to hire and promote those who are politically loyal, or “red,” versus those who are technically competent.

Third, the imperatives of CCP control over state functions still prevent effective coordination across the entirety of China’s government. There is no single, centralized body like the U.S. National Security Council that can coordinate military, foreign affairs, and domestic security issues and tradeoffs. Rather, each area has its own commission—the CMC, the CFAC, and the Central
National Security Commission (CNSC, more on that body later)—with jurisdictions that sometimes appear to overlap. Public information indicates Xi is the only person who is a formal member of all three bodies, which underscores that, while the leadership wants to improve coordination and might be making some progress, it stops short of actions that could allow government organs to coordinate horizontally if doing so might plausibly jeopardize the center’s control.

**Trend 3: Domestic Policy Headwinds and the Search for Alternative Forms of Political Legitimacy**

Beijing faces domestic challenges that will make it difficult to sustain the rapid economic development China enjoyed during its boom years and could generate more general social pressures. Multiple indicators are flashing red: In 2023, net foreign direct investment went negative for the first time in decades.37 Deeply indebted property developers threaten a vital asset class for average citizens and the economy writ large, one part of how China’s total debt-to-GDP ratio, has hit new records.38 China’s stock market lost $6 trillion in value between February 2021 and January 2024.39 Officials stopped reporting youth unemployment numbers after they hit 21.3 percent, although they have since resumed reporting with a new formula that excludes current students, thereby producing a lower number.40 Meanwhile, the country’s low birth rate continues to worsen an already dire demographic picture.41 The extent and duration of China’s slowdown remain to be seen. And how things ultimately play out will depend on the skill and resolve of policymakers in Beijing.

Still, the souring economic picture, combined with tighter political control, has created a broad social malaise in the country.42 Xi and other senior officials rail against the trends among young Chinese people to “lie flat” and “let it rot,” basically opting out of the rat race. Meanwhile, more Chinese people are trying to emigrate and take their wealth abroad.43 Those pressures seemed to boil over briefly during the November 2022 “blank paper” or “A4” protests, named after the size of the pieces of white paper protesters held, that helped force the abrupt end of Xi’s draconian zero-COVID policy. To be sure, Xi appears to retain a broad base of acquiescence and even support; political revolution is not in the offing. But gone are the days earlier in this century when the model that powered China’s rise seemed unstoppable.

**EFFECTS**

This set of challenges is likely to create two contradictory pressures in Beijing’s foreign and security policy decision-making. First, China’s leaders will feel pressure to reach out and try to improve ties with the world. China’s goals will be twofold: manage or resolve issues that might distract or overwhelm policymakers who are occupied dealing with domestic challenges, and beat back efforts to “de-risk” away from China and instead deepen economic and trade links. Further, PRC leaders need to burnish China’s image as a trade and investment partner to lure foreign capital and sustain technology transfer and co-development.44

China’s charm offensive might even include some tactical moderation of its coercive and aggressive operations in East Asia. U.S. President Joe Biden openly hypothesized this dynamic in his September 2023 assessment that “I don’t think [China’s economic slowdown is] going to cause China to invade Taiwan. And matter of fact, the opposite—it probably doesn’t have the—the same capacity that it had before.”45 Taiwan’s current President Tsai Ing-wen has articulated a similar logic.46 (Of course, leaders commonly characterize situations for diplomatic signaling purposes in ways that might or might not reflect their true assessment.)

The second pressure, however, pushes in the opposite direction.47 Xi and the CCP will be tempted to turn to an assertive and at times even aggressive form of nationalism. In the post-Mao era, the CCP has relied on high growth rates as its primary source of legitimacy. The implicit social contract, or what some have called the “authoritarian bargain,” held that Chinese citizens would cede politics to the CCP.48 The party would deliver expanded economic opportunity and high growth rates in return. An era of lower growth will mean the CCP must draw from other sources of citizens’ support (along with repression) to protect its hold on power.

Beijing is likely to avoid the most extreme possible manifestation of nationalistic fervor, starting a diversionary war, because the costs and risks of doing so are likely to remain prohibitive.49 But Xi will still leverage nationalism for diversionary purposes.50 Antagonism toward “hostile foreign forces,” particularly the United States and Japan, can provide a convenient scapegoat for China’s leaders who need someone other than themselves to blame for the country’s faltering economy. Fanning nationalist flames is not risk-free or cost-free, though, as those same sentiments can catalyze activists who later turn their ire against the domestic leadership. In addition, nationalism can create expectations for
performative but self-defeating aggression abroad. China also might take aggressive action for structural reasons, specifically if Beijing concludes that a worsening economic trajectory means it has a closing window to achieve a given ambition, such as taking control of Taiwan.51

As these contradictory pressures come into tension with one another, China’s record under Xi indicates that he tends to privilege coercion and even force as policy options over diplomacy to negotiate pragmatic resolutions. It is reasonable to conclude this trend will continue unless China’s material position weakens enough to prompt Xi to fundamentally reevaluate the efficacy of coercion and force as a means of pursuing his strategic objectives. Such a dynamic does not preclude outreach from Beijing, as recent improvements in U.S.-China relations show. But outreach probably reflects more a tonal and tactical thaw—a charm offensive—rather than a substantive and strategic reorientation.

Separately, a slowing domestic economy will dent the power and influence China gained through its rapid rise and its role as a gargantuan market driving global economic growth. Estimates of when, if ever, China’s economy will surpass the United States’ have seen the timelines slip further into the future, and some question whether the Chinese economy will ever eclipse the U.S. economy in nominal GDP terms.52 As its downsides reveal themselves, Beijing’s governance model will be harder to defend and will require much more effort to promote. Meanwhile, the material underpinnings of initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and by extension the influence they buy, will continue to weaken. Domestic support for such programs will decline, too, as the tradeoffs between investing at home and abroad become starker.53 One area will continue to receive resources, though: military spending. That is because China’s defense budget remains relatively low as a percentage of its GDP and therefore is not a major drag on the overall economy. In addition, Xi sees military might as both a vital instrument for achieving his geopolitical goals and an achievement in its own right.

**Trend 4: Elevation of Regime Security over Other Concerns**

i has put addressing domestic threats to regime security, both real and perceived, at the center of his governing agenda. The preeminence of Xi’s domestic security agenda became clear early in his tenure with the issuance in April 2013 of a communiqué that came to be known as “Document 9.”54 That memo laid out a vision rife with political threats and called on PRC leaders to strengthen their work in the “ideological sphere.” Xi has built out the vision through his concept of “holistic national security” and formally called for integrating development and security, thereby elevating security to the same priority level as development in party policy.55
To oversee implementation throughout the party-state, in November 2013, China established a new Central National Security Commission (CNSC).56 That commission primarily focuses on centralizing coordination for domestic and regime security rather than foreign affairs, as other countries’ national security councils usually do. Reports suggest, though, that the CNSC sometimes touches on foreign policy issues when they might threaten internal social stability or regime security.57

The results of this approach can be seen in the Chinese government’s draconian repression of the Uyghurs, Tibetans, and other ethnic minorities; Beijing’s crackdown and imposition of a national security law in Hong Kong; and tightening restrictions for journalists, lawyers, academics, and civil society throughout the country. Xi has overseen the passage of a suite of laws in support of this campaign, which allows for rule by law rather than rule of law, that is, to use the law to supplement the state’s power rather than limit that power.58 The government has also sought to enlist the whole of Chinese society, down to the average citizen, in sweeping counterespionage campaigns.59

The same quest for political security drives Xi’s purge of the CCP’s ranks through the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and other tools. That body targets officials at every level of the party. The CCDI’s works focuses on countering corruption, which Xi believes is an existential risk for the party. But informally, the CCDI enforces other crimes, too, mainly insufficient loyalty to Xi. One might assume that, after more than a decade in power, Xi would have addressed the bulk of the problematic personnel in the party and that disciplinary actions for CCP officials therefore would have slowed. But that is not the case. Instead, disciplinary actions have continued and even increased—including in the military—in a way that means effectively detaining people through exit bans or even formally detaining them as a form of hostage diplomacy, as was the case for two Canadian citizens held hostage for two and a half years.64 The changed environment helps explain why tourism to China has failed to rebound to pre-pandemic levels despite the government’s efforts to lure visitors back.65

China’s drive to address perceived political threats at home and “make the world safe for the CCP” abroad also shapes its overseas behavior in several ways. Chinese policymakers have clearly decided that the global reputational and economic costs of large-scale human rights abuses are worth sustaining to address the perceived security risks. Although they deny, obfuscate, and rationalize those actions to try to reduce those costs, they remain unwilling to change their actions. In addition, Beijing’s increasing boldness in hunting CCP targets overseas—including setting up unauthorized police stations in foreign countries, including the United States—has deepened tensions with the countries in which China conducts those operations.66

Next, in addition to facilitating the CCP’s own repression, Beijing’s repression apparatus is now an export in its own right. China provides technical assistance, including equipment and training, to other countries looking to control their populations.67 Beijing also seeks to redefine fundamental concepts including “democracy” and “human rights” to interpretations that ostensibly favor group benefits over individual rights.68

Finally, the elevation of security concerns changes the dynamics of how China’s foreign and security bureaucracy interacts with its counterparts. The removal of former Foreign Minister Qin and former Defense Minister Li Shangfu, who both also held State Councilor titles, raises the issue that foreign governments do not
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know with whom to invest in building a relationship beyond Xi. Separately, the ascendance of security bureaucracies appears to have boosted the power of China’s security services, especially the Ministry of State Security (MSS) and the Ministry of Public Security. The then-head of the MSS, Chen Wenqing, was promoted to the Politburo in October 2022. The MSS has clearly felt emboldened to step out from the shadows and carve a larger public profile than in previous years, including by starting an account on the Chinese social media website WeChat and issuing statements on events such as Taiwan’s 2024 presidential election.

Trend 5: Diplomatic and Military Assertiveness and Seeking an Active Global Leadership Role

China’s foreign and security policy decision-making is also driven by assertiveness and seeking to actively shape the outside world through what Xi has called “struggle.” This trend was reaffirmed recently in a Foreign Relations Law passed by the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, China’s rubber-stamp legislature, in June 2023. Xi’s preferred approach shows through most visibly in the caustic statements of “wolf warrior” diplomats and other PRC officials, which have abated somewhat but not disappeared. In December 2023, Xi instructed a gathering of China’s ambassadors to forge a “diplomatic iron army” ready to stand up to strong powers.

Beijing’s assertiveness also shows in China’s rapid military buildup under Xi to pursue his goal to build a “world-class military” by 2049, along with the use of those capabilities to try to coerce its neighbors to settle territorial disputes on China’s terms.

Beijing’s assertiveness and seeking an active global leadership role reaches beyond countering foreign criticism of PRC actions. Rather, Xi has called for China to “enhance strategic confidence” and sought to offer the world a collection of principles and institutions that, taken together, constitute an alternative governance model that applies not only to the country’s domestic politics and development but to international relations writ large. It is no longer enough for Beijing to accede to existing international organizations and standards. Instead, China must be seen as setting, or at least shaping, those standards, from ideas to institutions to staffing (see chart). The fact that it has become hackneyed to observe that China’s foreign policy under Xi is a direct rejection of Deng’s “hide your capabilities and bide your time” dictum illustrates just how fast and how far Xi has moved his country away from that legacy approach.

To those ends, Xi and other senior Chinese leaders have articulated ambitious goals for these initiatives and PRC foreign policy in general. They have promoted China’s domestic governance system, saying the country offers “a new form of human civilization.” And with regard to international institutions, at the CCP Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in June 2018, Xi ordered China to “lead the reform of the global governance system” as part of building a “community with a shared future for mankind.” Such guidance flows from Xi’s official assessment that “the East is rising and the West is declining” amid “great changes unseen in a century,” by which Xi means China is rising as the post–Cold War period of U.S. dominance fades. In its place, China should “take center stage in the world” and redefine “major country diplomacy” for a world that is becoming multipolar at the global level and, ideally for Beijing, eventually unipolar at the regional level in the Indo-Pacific.

### CHINA’S FOREIGN POLICY INITIATIVES STARTED UNDER XI JINPING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of Introduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belt and Road Initiative (originally One Belt, One Road)</td>
<td>September 2013, October 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Data Security Initiative</td>
<td>September 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global Development Initiative</td>
<td>September 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global Security Initiative</td>
<td>April 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global Civilization Initiative</td>
<td>March 2023</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global Artificial Intelligence Governance Initiative</td>
<td>October 2023</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
From top to bottom, photos of world leaders attending China’s Belt and Road Forums in 2017, 2019, and 2023. Attendance has dwindled as China’s initial grandiose vision for infrastructure development faced difficult realities in implementation.
Beyond China’s Black Box: Five Trends Shaping Beijing’s Foreign and Security Policy Decision-Making Under Xi Jinping

EFFECTS

This trend affects China’s foreign policy in several ways. First, it has fed a self-reinforcing cycle of growing tensions. Beijing’s belligerent rhetoric and aggressive actions provoke countermeasures from targeted countries. PRC policymakers then interpret those countermeasures as evidence of foreigners’ hostile intent toward China. Chinese leaders once viewed the international environment as being in an unalloyed “period of strategic opportunity,” but now Xi argues that “strategic opportunity coexists with risks and challenges, and uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising.” This justifies Beijing’s perceived need to fight back against what Xi has called Western “all-round containment, encirclement, and suppression.”

To be sure, most officials and scholars in the liberal democratic world, including the author, believe that changes are rising. This justifies Beijing’s perceived need to contain, encircle, and suppress. China’s foreign policy in several ways. First, it has fed a self-reinforcing cycle of growing tensions. Beijing’s belligerent rhetoric and aggressive actions provoke countermeasures from targeted countries. PRC policymakers then interpret those countermeasures as evidence of foreigners’ hostile intent toward China. Chinese leaders once viewed the international environment as being in an unalloyed “period of strategic opportunity,” but now Xi argues that “strategic opportunity coexists with risks and challenges, and uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising.” This justifies Beijing’s perceived need to fight back against what Xi has called Western “all-round containment, encirclement, and suppression.”

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Second, China’s more assertive approach requires PRC diplomats to shoehorn any activities into Xi’s marquee frameworks. Chinese diplomats pressure their counterparts to sign up to or endorse those programs as a way of lending legitimacy to Xi’s and China’s global agenda. Form often comes before substance here, as signing up to general plans and concepts outpaces concrete outcomes. The hyper-focus on China’s brand name initiatives also frequently gets in the way of real, pragmatic coalition building and cooperation to address global issues (to the extent Beijing is genuinely interested in doing so).

Finally, Xi’s calls for China to revise the system leads Beijing to build out a framework of partnerships and institutions in support of an alternative global order. This includes Beijing’s growing list of diplomatic partnerships, despite China’s proclaimed opposition to alliances as destabilizing relics of the Cold War. The China-Russia partnership, which has deepened despite Moscow’s war in Ukraine, provides the most prominent example. It also includes organizations and forums that Beijing runs or dominates such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the BRICS, the Boao Forum for Asia, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Finally, the growing number of conflicts in which China seeks to play a mediator role, with varying levels of success, further demonstrates Beijing’s ambition. Recent examples include Ukraine, Saudi Arabia-Iran, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and the Horn of Africa.

Critical Knowledge Gaps Remain

Examining these trends helps illuminate the macro pressures shaping China’s foreign and security policy decision-making. Many aspects remain opaque, though. This section explores some of these “known unknowns,” or things analysts know exist or happen but about which few or no details are available. In addition, effectively analyzing China’s party-state system requires a realistic baseline for comparison. The regime in Beijing—an authoritarian government careening toward dictatorship—is undoubtedly secretive by any measure. But even liberal democratic governments keep some processes and information secret, so the analytical standard cannot be complete, real-time knowledge. That said, five aspects of how the party-state makes decisions about its foreign and security policies remain particularly opaque.

Information flows. The first is how information flows to Xi and other senior leaders, or what in the U.S. context is often called the “paper process.” Outside observers do not know anything about what types and sources of information Xi consumes regularly. He does not give press conferences or unscripted interviews. Studies of authoritarian regimes have shown that information that gets to leaders tends to be poor quality because disagreement tends to be perceived as disloyalty. Nevertheless, getting accurate information is essential for Xi to assess how his policies are faring in practice. The lack of a functioning feedback loop could create dangerous misunderstandings. Better knowledge about those information flows that takes into account both longtime actors and newer influences such as Chinese think tanks could give analysts a more nuanced understanding of the sincerity of Xi’s apparent optimism about China’s trajectory (among other topics). Specifically, it could indicate to what extent Xi’s optimism is an attempt to inject confidence into the system or whether he underestimates the challenges the country faces.

Dynamic among Xi and his top advisors. The second is the role of Xi’s close advisors and exactly how they exercise influence. Xi has succeeded in stacking the leadership—including the Politburo and its Standing Committee—with his men. (And they are all men; the Politburo has no women for the first time in 25 years.) But from the outside it is not clear the degree to which close confidants can speak truth to power or genuinely debate new approaches. The most likely effect has been to create an environment prone to groupthink if
bodies covering these issues are reported publicly: for example, the foreign minister’s annual address to PRC diplomats and the Party Congress work reports every five years. But key questions about the specifics remain, namely whether meeting processes are structured to always have the same people and occur on a regular basis—or whether those meetings are more ad hoc, with participants joining or falling off the list depending on the issue being discussed and/or political winds. PRC media are not allowed to write what, in the American context, are called “process stories,” or detailed stories about how government decisions were made. Little is known about how organizations that provide staff support to senior leadership—such as the CCP Secretariat, the CCP General Office, and the CFAC—function on a day-to-day basis under Xi.

Not outright sycophancy. But a different dynamic is possible and could prevail in certain situations: Xi could have enough trust in his inner circle’s loyalty to him that he allows more frank advice and debate because he does not feel the need to worry about their fealty to him or his political agenda. The role Premier Li Qiang reportedly played in convincing Xi to end Xi’s draconian zero-COVID policy—which had initially helped to control the pandemic but had grown ineffective, costly, and unpopular—provides an example. Meanwhile, Xi’s top aides already appear to be jockeying among themselves, particularly Xi’s Chief of Staff and “security czar” Cai Qi and Premier Li.

Structure and frequency of meetings. The third mystery factor is China’s meetings process for foreign and security policy issues. Some meetings of the formal

Xi surrounded by the six other members of the Chinese Communist Party’s Politburo Standing Committee. It is not clear from the outside the degree to which these men, all Xi loyalists, can speak truth to power or genuinely debate new policy approaches to major challenges facing the country. (Original photos by Kevin Frayer/Getty Images)
Informal constraints on Xi’s power. Fourth, it is not clear whether there are, or could be, any meaningful checks and balances in China’s elite decision-making under Xi. The PRC system remains Leninist in both structure and culture and was never designed to have formal checks and balances. But the practice of collective leadership often pitted the ambitions of different factions against one another, forming a sort of check against the unbridled exercise of power by any single person or group. Even Mao confronted pushback in 1962 after his Great Leap Forward campaign ended in catastrophe. Moreover, Xi’s consolidation of power has created a constituency of losers in the system. Stories documenting a backlash over Xi’s policies have become a perennial feature of China analyses. And some observers have argued that Xi’s consolidation of power means there is no one else to blame for problems. But external evidence of those disenfranchised groups using their power to stop or redirect Xi remains scant. In this context, it is not clear whether tactical shifts in China’s foreign and security policies are coming from Xi’s reappraisal, whether he is yielding to internal forms of resistance, or some combination thereof.

Leadership transition plans. The fifth aspect is Xi’s plans for timing and manner of power transition. Xi obviously has worked hard to remove any formal or informal time constraints on his tenure as China’s paramount leader. So transition plans might not yet exist, even in Xi’s mind. He might be waiting to decide based on circumstances as they evolve. Although it is clear he wants to avoid becoming a lame duck once a successor is tapped, if for no other reason than ceding power in an authoritarian system can be politically and even physically dangerous. The question of leadership transition could be resolved in a few different ways, and nearly all of them would be messier than a predictable transition to new leadership on a planned schedule. In the meantime, observers will have to look for indicators of how the dynamics of Xi’s leadership shift as he continues to age.

Recommendations for Policymakers

To better understand and respond to the intricacies of China’s foreign and security policy decision-making, the United States and like-minded partners should:

- Recognize that Xi’s personal style and preferences are now the dominant factor shaping China’s foreign and security policies—but how that reality manifests will continue to evolve.

- Xi’s long tenure in power creates the temptation to assume there is more continuity than change in how China makes foreign and security policy decisions. Yet Xi’s third term will probably differ substantially from his first and second terms. Multiple structural elements have changed in the last decade-plus, including Xi reaching new heights of power, his signature policies having had time to take effect, and China’s overall power trajectory beginning to level off. Going forward, U.S. analysts should work to improve their understanding by comparing Xi’s rule with trends in regime personalization under Mao and earlier periods of Chinese history. Those analyses will have to expand, though, to include similar case studies from other states as well, including other personalist authoritarian states such as Russia and North Korea.

- Track how trends shaping China’s foreign and security policy decision-making might affect the country’s various bureaucratic institutions differently.

Overall, Xi and the CCP have wrested power away from the foreign and security bureaucracies of the Chinese state. But bureaucratic interests and responses will still matter and will not be uniform. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will remain important and be empowered to carry out policy but probably less able to shape it. For its part, the PLA will continue to receive close scrutiny from Xi both because of Xi’s ambitions for the force’s eventual military prowess as well as his structural distrust of the PLA given that it wields the coercive arm of the state and continues to be rocked by massive corruption scandals. Intelligence offices within each U.S. department and agency dealing with China—including the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense Intelligence Agency—should conduct assessments of how Xi’s centralization of power and the party consuming state functions affect their counterpart organizations in China.

Anticipate uncoordinated PRC actions, such as the 2023 spy balloon incident, as well as policies characterized by drift followed by rapid shifts, because both reflect structural features of the system.

Despite more centralized control and “top-level design” under Xi, China’s foreign and security policymaking apparatus will sometimes still lack effective coordination for two reasons. The first is because, while Xi sets its overall direction, the system is too sprawling to oversee how those policies are implemented. The second reason is that fundamentally the system is designed to boost coordination but only to the extent that it improves rather than weakens.
the center’s control. Xi is the only official who sits on the CMC, CFAC, and CNSC. That fact both makes him essential and helps prevent other officials from coordinating horizontally on moves that might circumvent or oppose him—or, in extreme circumstances, even depose him. The downside, however, can be seen in such cases as the spy balloon incident that disrupted U.S.-China relations in early 2023. U.S. officials have publicly assessed that Xi was not aware the balloon was set to fly over the United States, even though he likely approved the general program.

Relatedly, the centralization of power around Xi has created an environment that incentivizes close compliance, and sometimes overcompliance, with Xi’s edicts or doing nothing to avoid being subject to shifting standards. Officials worried about running afoul of leadership priorities have been reluctant to adjust policies even when they create unfavorable results, leading to policy drift. Then, when Xi approves any changes, the system readjusts rapidly, leading to a feeling of whiplash. The tumultuous end of the zero-COVID policy illustrates this dynamic. U.S. policymakers should expect to see these phenomena from their PRC counterparts because they reflect structural features of the system.

Prepare for deepening policy contradictions alongside continued assertive nationalism from Beijing.

China’s foreign and security policymaking under Xi is rife with contradictions that are likely to deepen over time. They include Beijing’s assertive nationalism and focus on security contrasted with a purported desire for deeper integration and cooperation with the rest of the world. Another contradiction is the growing global need for more insights about China amid an information environment inside the country that constricts by the day. A third contradiction is China’s increasingly sophisticated technological ambitions set against a rigid ideological and political atmosphere that could impair the country’s access to international markets for equipment, technology, and innovative ideas.

Prioritize direct diplomatic interactions with Xi.

U.S. and allied governments should continue to prioritize face-to-face conversations with Xi in standalone meetings as well as on the margins of major multilateral summits. In-person interactions are best, but calls and videoconferences can supplement. The rationales for doing so are twofold. First, as the party-state system in China becomes more personalized, interactions with the person actually making decisions will become more important. That is because Xi’s accumulation of power to himself will mean his preferences likely define the bounds of acceptable policy options that can be debated within China’s foreign and security policymaking bureaucracies. Second, and relatively, because Xi is surrounded by loyalists, the information being served to him is likely skewed to support his preferences. Talking to Xi directly offers a rare, guaranteed opportunity to penetrate that information bubble and ensure that China’s key decisionmaker knows U.S. redlines, likely reactions to policies under consideration, and what policymakers are really thinking in the West.

Formally compare assessments on the PRC system with allies and partners.

China’s relationships with America’s allies and partners are different from Beijing’s relationship with Washington. U.S. officials should compare notes with like-minded countries in bilateral settings and in minilateral groups such as the Five Eyes, the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral, the Quad, and the U.S.–European Union Dialogue on China. Doing so could yield valuable insights about how China’s foreign and security policymaking apparatus approaches states with different geopolitical circumstances. The machinations of those PRC party-state organs are a mosaic, and the full picture will only become clearer with more pieces.

Develop contingency plans for different leadership succession scenarios.

The president should task the National Intelligence Council (NIC) and the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff to lead an interagency process examining different leadership succession scenarios in China. First, the NIC should work with both the U.S. intelligence community and outside experts from different disciplines to develop potential scenarios and sub-variations within them, including scenarios that would help policymakers understand what the later stages of Xi’s rule could look like. Then, the State Department Policy Planning staff should lead an interagency process to explore the policy implications of each scenario and begin to generate potential responses. Such a process would embody the aphorism from President Dwight Eisenhower that “plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” The process would force thinking on difficult issues in advance, even if it does not result in off-the-shelf solutions when leadership succession eventually occurs.
Conclusion

Any of the particulars of how China’s foreign and security policy decision-making apparatus functions will continue to be shrouded in mystery and remain a black box. Although, as this report has shown, some of that opacity can be alleviated by examining the big trends internal to the PRC party-state that are shaping Beijing’s approach to the world.

The net effect of these trends is likely to be ongoing, vigorous PRC cultivation of relations with developing and illiberal countries. Beijing will pair that with intermittent outreach campaigns to stabilize ties with advanced liberal democracies, including the United States. Despite its desire for self-reliance, China still needs trade, financial, and technological links with the outside world, and some degree of global stability to profit from them—perhaps even more so than at any time since the beginning of this century. Moreover, Beijing wants to convince other countries that it is a responsible major power, a force for stability on the world stage, and indeed a leader whose model holds lessons other states should emulate.

At the same time, China—spurred on by a combination of nationalist grievances and ambitions, and hyper-sensitive to perceived provocations—will wield its formidable power, including its massive military, toward the goal of revising the regional and global orders to reflect its preferences. Beijing will continue to rationalize its actions as being in “defense” of its expansive territorial claims and CCP control at home. China’s growing assertiveness will likely be accelerated by Xi’s personal prerogatives and his stranglehold on the CCP, the search for ways to bulwark CCP control against internal and external challenges, and the view that China can best “make the world safe for the CCP” by building out an alternative international system comprising norms, institutions, and partnerships.

The implementation of this approach will, however, be hampered by Xi’s consolidation of power and the faulty information environment and policy processes it begets. Faulty, though, does not necessarily mean less dangerous; in fact, the opposite might be true. Party-state institutional changes that reward ideological rectitude over technocratic competence and strengthen central control rather than improving intergovernmental coordination will pose additional stumbling blocks. Taken together, it is this China—often messier behind closed doors than even the most raucous democracy is in the open—that the United States, its allies and partners, and the world will have to contend with in the years to come.


4. The number of members on both the Politburo and its Standing Committee have shifted slightly over time. These numbers describe their current size. Grace Li, “Team Xi: China’s New Leadership Lineup,” Nikkei Asia, October 23, 2022, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-party-congress/Team-Xi-China-s-new-leadership-lineup.


51. The most fulsome take on this argument comes from Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022).


56. Some translations use “State Security Commission.”


76. To be sure, Xi’s predecessors inched away from Deng’s “hide and bide” policy, but Xi has departed from it at a full sprint. See Rush Doshi, The Long Game (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, July 8, 2021), https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-long-game-9780197645482?cc=us&lang=en&.


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94. This report does not adopt gender as an analytical lens, but Xi’s China arguably provides a rich case study. See Claire Cozens, “For the First Time in Decades, There Are No Women on China’s Top Leadership Team,” interview with Dr. Leta Hong Fincher, Fuller Project, January 17, 2024, https://fullerproject.org/story/there-are-no-women-on-chinas-top-leadership-team.


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100. Akayla Gardner and Justin Sink, “Biden Says Xi Was
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101. Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Remarks at the National De-
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