

The Rising Power of Chinese Leader Xi Jinping and the Future of China

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Summary: Since rise to office in 2012, Xi has been steadily and aggressively consolidating his power. In addition to serving as president, head of the party and military, he is also the head of a number of other important groups, including the Central National Security Commission and the leading Group for Financial and Economic Affairs. To many, he wants to leave a celebrated legacy. That's why he is, in a sense, emulating President Vladimir Putin, by giving himself a virtual office for life¹.

Take Away: Chinese President Xi Jinping has gradually assumed more power within his office. He has also implemented a more authoritarian control over China. The Xi Jinping administration has used China's growing economic and military might to impose its stamp on the world order.

The First World Internet Conference (FWIC) held in Wuzhen, Zhejiang Province, in mid-November, was a good example of the Xi administration's effort to enhance the country's influence on the Internet². Under the Xi administration, a cyberspace regulatory marathon has occurred in China. Since then, Chinese authorities have tightened the state's control over all things cyber — from social media and online publishing to IT business models and cloud data centers.

The Chinese state is becoming ever more assertive in censoring the Internet, fighting cybercrime and proclaiming its Internet governance model in international forums. Cybersecurity Law obliges companies selling hardware and software solutions to so-called critical infrastructure operators to pass a state-administered cybersecurity review. The law classifies the following areas as critical: communication infrastructure, energy, transport, water supply, finance, public utilities and e-government services. The law also mentions unspecified areas that might affect “national security,” the “citizens' well-being” or public interest. Such vague language could allow authorities to arbitrarily classify more and more areas as critical.

The cybersecurity law stipulates that data, such as user data, collected by critical infrastructure operators, must be stored within China's borders. The Administrative Rules for the Commercial Use of Encryption stipulate that companies are only permitted to use state-approved encryption technologies. The import of secure routers, firewalls, and encryption software must be authorized by the Office of State Commercial Cryptography Administration (OSCCA)³.

In March 2017, President XI Jinping urged security forces to erect a “Great Wall of Steel” around the violently hit western region of Xinjiang after an apparent spike in bloodletting that authorities blamed on Islamic extremists and separatists. Xi issued the traditional military

1 <http://www.voanews.com/a/xi-china-politics/3775175.html>

2 https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-soft-power-deficit-widens-as-xi-tightens-screws-over-ideology/#.VOOBN_nF9uM

3 <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/chinas-quest-for-cybersecurity-causes-headache-for-foreign-companies/>

rallying call during a session of the national people's congress, China's annual rubber-stamp parliament, in Beijing.

Tens of thousands of heavily armed troops have poured onto the streets in recent weeks, vowing to wage a "people's war on terror" against militants. At one recent show of force, the regional Communist party chief urged troops to: *bury the corpses of terrorists in the vast sea of the people's war*.

Recent weeks have seen repeated hints that Xinjiang, already the setting for an intense security crackdown, is now entering a period of even tighter control. Last month it emerged that security officials had ordered residents to install GPS tracking devices in their vehicles to allow authorities to permanently monitor their movements. This week it was reported that stiff new anti-extremism regulations, including the ability to hold "extremist leaders" in solitary confinement, were being prepared, handing authorities special powers to deal with those deemed a terror threat⁴.

Tibetans from rural areas are being moved to towns through the government's forced resettlement policy. Pastoral Tibetans who live scattered with their herds in mountains and valleys are moved into compact and fenced towns. This allows the government to control the movement of these rural residents in the name of social stability. Tibetans have no say in the design of [relocation] policies that are radically altering their way of life, and – in an already highly repressive context – no ways to challenge them." Rights violations during this process range from lack of consultation to failure to provide adequate compensation, both of which are required under international law for evictions to be legitimate. After the move, the sudden shift from nomadic life to cities has increased unemployment in Tibet.

The State Council of China unveiled the National New Type Urbanization Plan (NUP) in 2014 to increase the percentage of urban residents in the total population of China from 52.6 percent in 2012 to 60 percent by 2020. The ratio of citizens with urban *hukou* (resident permit) will increase 35.3 percent to approximately 45 percent⁵.

On an international level, the Xi administration's proven random policy of overt acts of diplomacy while carrying out behavior, seems more aligned to the policies of Russia under Vladimir Putin. However, Chinese President Xi Jinping has cultivated an image as a modern leader oriented to more liberal ideas on the international stage.

Much public attention has been given to the recent diplomacy with Israel, where the two countries agreed to closer exchanges among young technological personnel, cooperation in joint labs, a global technology transfer center, innovation parks and an innovative cooperation center. China and Israel expect closer cooperation in air pollution control, waste management,

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/11/china-xi-jinping-wants-great-wall-of-steel-in-violence-hit-xinjiang>

5 <http://thediplomat.com/2017/03/chinas-urbancide-in-tibet/>

environmental monitoring, water conservation and purification, as well as hi-tech fields, said the statement⁶.

Recently, during a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, Xi called for peace between Israel and an independent Palestine as soon as possible. He stated, “*A peaceful, stable and developing Middle East is the common interest of all parties*”⁷.

Xi has furthered this image with the recent contentions regarding The Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea). Xi told U.S. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, that there are far more shared interests between the two countries than disputes, emphasizing the need for more communication and coordination on matters involving regional hotspots, according to a statement released by the Chinese foreign ministry⁸.

However, China’s actions have often been more inclined toward use of power, both military and economic, to promote its status on the global stage. Witness in 2014 the type of global hard-power projection that was unprecedented in recent Chinese history. Only two years old, the Xi administration had already used China’s growing economic and military might to impose its stamp on the world order.

During this time, the Chinese government allocated half of the \$100 billion seed money for the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). This was in addition to a similar amount that Beijing had committed to the BRICS Development Bank established earlier in the year. Moreover, Xi announced, at the APEC conference, that his government would offer \$40 billion in loans for infrastructure development related to the two Silk Road schemes. It was speculated, that these multi-pronged proposals seemed geared toward buying support from countries that might otherwise be lured into joining America’s perceived containment policy against China. Beijing also hoped that a web of finance and infrastructure — for example, high-speed railway networks partially financed by China — might restore the country’s traditional status as the Middle Kingdom of the Orient.

The Xi administration has also pulled out all the stops to project military power. In 2014, at the annual Zhuhai Air Show in Guangdong province that was held the same time as APEC, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) showcased state-of-the-art weapons such as the J-31 stealth jet fighter, which is billed as China’s answer to the United States’ F-35. The official media reported that sales of Chinese-made hardware has kept rising. “The demand for our products from emerging markets continues to expand. Now, a lot of foreign armies are coming to us,” said Liu Song, Deputy General Manager of Norinco, one of the country’s biggest arms manufacturers.

At the same time, PLA construction teams are enlarging islands in the South China Sea through relentless reclamation. Western news agencies recently reported that a strip of land large enough to serve as a runway for jet fighters had been added to Fiery Cross Reef (called Yongshu Reef in

6 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/21/c_136146441.htm

7 http://zeenews.india.com/world/chinese-president-xi-jinping-calls-for-peace-in-meeting-with-israeli-pm-benjamin-netanyahu_1988735.html

8 <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/19/politics/china-rex-tillerson-xi-jinping/>

China) in the Spratly's chain of disputed islands. This was in addition to similar reclamation work being done on Johnson Reef, another Spratly outcropping that is called Mabini by the Philippines and Chigua by China⁹. In more recent times, such aggression has only continued.

In March 2017, China and Russia are increasing joint exercises and stepping up sales of advanced weaponry to counter the U.S. The most recent military maneuvers took place in the South China Sea in September. Ten Chinese warships and two submarines joined three Russian vessels in large-scale exercises that included drills in capturing islands. The maneuvers coincided with an international court ruling that challenged Beijing's vast maritime claim over 90% of the strategic waterway.

Russian arms sales to China and military-technical cooperation could have significant consequences for the United States. Two recent arms deals will boost China's regional military clout, the report said. They include the sale of 24 Russian Su-35 fighters, delivery of which began in December, and upcoming transfers of advanced missile defenses. Russia finally agreed to sell China advanced S-400 air and missile defense systems, after several years of requests from Beijing. The first deliveries are expected next year.

The S-400s will help the Chinese gain air superiority over the 180-kilometer Taiwan Strait. Under a 1979 law, the U.S. is obligated to defend Taiwan from any Chinese military strike. Since 2012, military cooperation has been increasing, reflecting a resolution of differences between the two states of China and Russia. Russian and Chinese military exercises are also becoming more complex and involving strategically significant areas. One example was a major computer-simulated missile defense exercise held in May. The missile defense cooperation appears aimed at confounding U.S. military planning for the defense of allies in Asia. Washington has security commitments with Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and South Korea¹⁰.

China does not follow a policy of building its persona by outlandish and overt statements and threats. Instead, it works through informal means to make verbal protests and threats that could be perceived as highly controversial. As China seeks to build its prowess within Asia, it has sought to strengthen relations with traditional Indian affiliates, Nepal and Sri Lanka. In March 2017, Chinese media outlets issued a public warning of intention to *fight back* if India attempted to thwart China's efforts in establishing military relations with the two countries. The statement was not an official statement of the government but of the media. However, China has expressed concern over the ability to overcome the long entrenched influence India has in both countries. It has also expressed concern over India's ability to act as counter-balance to China's creeping power build¹¹. It could be possible that the media threat was an informal act on behalf of the government.

China is often accused of misrepresenting its military spending, which could be far higher than official documents show. Even taking the numbers at face value, China's defense outlay would

⁹ https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-soft-power-deficit-widens-as-xi-tightens-screws-over-ideology/#.VOOBN_nF9uM

¹⁰ <http://www.atimes.com/article/china-russia-cozy-arms-deals-military-drills/>

¹¹ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/dont-meddle-in-nepal-sri-lanka-china-media-warns-india/articleshow/57762891.cms>

be bigger than all of its regional rivals combined — excluding the U.S. Further, a single-digit annual increase could well mean that the PLA is now focused on qualitative improvements in its capabilities¹².

Additional Considerations: Xi Jinping is more powerful than ever after being elevated to a Communist Party "core" leader in 2016, an honor previously only bestowed upon Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping¹³. The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the phrase of "Xi as core leader of the party", was used repeatedly before officials discussed a wide range of topics from the economy to the environment. It is a sign that regardless of length of term or retirement age, Xi will be around for a long time going forward.

Since rising to office in 2012, Xi has been steadily and aggressively consolidating his power. In addition to serving as president and head of the party and military, he is also the head of the Leading Group for Financial and Economic Affairs. It looks like he wants to leave a large and lasting legacy. That's why he is, in a sense, emulating President Vladimir Putin by giving himself a virtual office for life. Xi could step down as president but stay in charge of the Central Military Commission or some of the leading groups which he has set up including the Central National Security Commission¹⁴.

Xi is the son of revolutionary leader Xi Zhongxun, one of the founders of the communist guerrilla movement in northern China during the 1940s. Unlike most of China's so-called "princelings" — the elite offspring of senior Communist Party officials — Xi was exposed to the hardships faced by ordinary Chinese citizens when he grew up. He did, however, manage to work in a number of groups, including the Central National Security Commission¹⁵.

His father fell from grace during the Cultural Revolution and was ousted as deputy prime minister in 1962 by Chairman Mao Tse-tung. Xi's father was sent to work in a provincial factory and then jailed in 1968 before managing to return to power as a pioneer of economic reforms.

After studying chemical engineering at Beijing's Tsinghua University during the late 1970s, Xi gained a military background by working as an aide for Geng Biao, the secretary-general of China's Central Military Commission. Xi's career as a public official began in 1982 at the local level. He held party posts in four different provinces during the 1980s and '90s before breaking into national politics in 2002 as a member of the Communist Party's Central Committee¹⁶.

When he was sent to the countryside at 15 and his father was jailed, Xi Jinping learned a lesson in political pragmatism that has helped to carry him to within a step of the pinnacle of power in China. Eschewing the turbulent fervor of the Cultural Revolution in favor of stable growth, he has spent the 30 years since then working his way up the Communist party hierarchy.

12 <http://www.atimes.com/chinas-not-reassuring-foreign-policy/>

13 <https://www.forbes.com/profile/xi-jinping/>

14 <http://www.voanews.com/a/xi-china-politics/3775175.html>

15 <http://www.rferl.org/a/china-profile-xi-jinping/24764283.html>

16 <http://www.rferl.org/a/china-profile-xi-jinping/24764283.html>

Despite his pedigree as the son of a high official of the revolutionary era, Mr. Xi's elevation was a surprise to many politburo watchers. But it signals the growing strength of party "princelings" and the diffusion of power inside the world's biggest political party. Like many "intellectual youths" in the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Xi was dispatched to the countryside to learn from the peasant masses. It was a bitter experience that helped to shape his views. He returned to Beijing to complete the first of his two degrees from the elite Tsinghua University. Unlike most recent politburo members, he has a doctorate in law and ideological education¹⁷. President Xi Jinping is proving to be a more powerful and well-grounded figure than those who have preceded.

Conclusion: Xi Jinping seems to be emulating the actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin in the way he is approaching both his domestic and international policies. Though the Russian President promotes an image of aggressive power to the world, Xi has tried presenting a public image of diplomacy and liberalism. Meanwhile, Xi has been discreetly engaging in a more totalitarian strategy aimed at building China into a global power, securing government control and strengthening his own power base. He has also demonstrated an inclination to use heavy handed, draconian measures to curtail any threats to the state.

The U.S. should work hard to understand and to anticipate what is likely to occur within the next few years of the Xi Jinping administration. On a domestic level, he will emerge as a vastly more powerful national figure than any of his predecessors. It is speculated that he will entrench himself enough that he will be able to hold onto the presidency longer than legally allowed. Or, he will again follow in the path of the Vladimir Putin and allow a transition of the presidency to a puppet figure while retaining control of all the primary organizations and central power.

Another consideration is that under Xi, China will continue to build its military capacity. Gradually, they are acquiring the technology and hardware to become a more powerful military force in the world and the dominating force within Asia. Inevitably, the goal will be to become strong enough to curtail the affronts to this ambition, namely India and the U.S. Overtly, China will play the persona of diplomacy until they have the military strength or image of military strength to project a more assertive agenda. Then Xi will begin to act more like Russia in the way it engages regional neighbors through economic and, if necessary, military pressure to assert its authority.

What will complicate this strategy is the unpredictable nature of the new administration of the U.S president, Donald Trump. The Chinese have yet to understand how the new president will behave in response to their actions. Most likely, the Chinese will act cautiously over the next year or two until a better understanding of the new U.S. administration can be reached.

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/26/china.uknews4>

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