

## 2022, Xi Jinping's Annus Horribilis: Or Is It?

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2022 is proving to be a difficult one for China and for President Xi Jinping. Choices like Xi's embrace of Russia and the zero-COVID policy have prompted sporadic outbursts from the Chinese public and a backlash abroad. Unsurprisingly, this has spawned speculation that Xi is facing political difficulties at home that could hamstring or even disrupt his plan to remain China's top leader after the 20th Party Congress later this year. Despite the real challenges Xi and the party have faced in 2022, however, this paper will argue that such narratives rest on a series of faulty assumptions about the impetus for Xi's consolidation of power, the presence of powerful opposition voices within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) system, and the judgment that Xi's policy approach amounts to a series of blunders that may help his critics as they try to diminish him at the party congress:

- Concerning the circumstances around Xi's rise, the notion that Xi tricked the party elite into letting him hijack power in a form of soft coup is erroneous. Xi's Politburo colleagues and mentors "hired" him to forcefully manage what they collectively viewed as a brewing existential crisis rooted in organizational drift and egregious corruption that nearly threatened his accession to power. Xi embraced their endorsement and used it to bring the regime's coercive apparatus back under the party's and his personal control.

- The idea that Xi is facing strong opposition from powerful rival interest groups seems inconsistent with the positive observable facts on the ground. Suggestions that Premier Li Keqiang or a broader coalition of regime constituencies are pushing back against Xi ignore both the CCP's operational mechanics and the changes Xi has made to them that make such gambits more difficult and more dangerous. They also rely too heavily on outmoded analytic tools like factional models and institutional bargaining.
- Even Xi's most notionally polarizing policy choices may seem less so when viewed through the Politburo's lens on domestic and foreign matters. In some cases, like the partnership with Russia, it is probably too early to draw conclusions about whether it will make Xi vulnerable, as critical elements of that equation still are playing out in real time.

Moreover, Xi appears to be hurtling toward a substantial victory at the 20th Party Congress. The exact titles and other laureates that he will receive at the conclave still are unknown, but there is little doubt that he will remain China's top leader, in whatever capacity, for the foreseeable future:

- On the personnel front, Xi seems to be doing very well in the power ministries that count when it comes to possible challenges to his authority. There is little

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question about his dominance of the military, and he is salting his supporters several rows deep within core control structures like the security services and the propaganda apparatus.

- Xi has made his greatest gains in the ideological sphere, where he has used a relentless campaign of theoretical aggrandizement to boost his standing in the leadership. He has steadily erased any meaningful presence in party history of his two immediate predecessors, and even Deng Xiaoping's contribution has been increasingly minimized. Xi is on track to truncate his current clunky 12-word ideological concept to the pithier "Xi Jinping Thought" and possibly to collect other unique accolades that would make Mao Zedong his only match.

The policy implications of faulty assumptions about Xi's fortunes and the general state of elite politics could be substantial. Their cascading effects could seriously impair policymakers' ability to craft a full range of policy solutions when grappling with uncertainty in real time. Unlike under his post-Deng predecessors, when a lack of leadership cohesion resulted in policy drift, Xi has a plan and is executing it, even if it is not to the West's liking. Therefore, foreign governments would be wise to deal with Xi as he is if they seek to mount effective policy responses.

### INTRODUCTION

For a man obsessed with control, 2022 has not gone according to plan for Chinese President Xi Jinping. A year ago, Xi looked set to cruise to a major victory at the 20th Party Congress in late 2022. Having orchestrated a smooth celebration of the 100th birthday of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in July 2021, Xi followed up a few months later

with the passage at the Sixth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee of a hagiographic resolution on party history that elevated Xi's standing in the party's ideological hierarchy to a pedestal second only to Mao Zedong. As for 2022, Xi hoped to burnish his own and the CCP's international credentials by hosting a disturbance-free, if admittedly controversial, Winter Olympic Games before being apotheosized in the annals of both CCP and world Marxism and crowned for at least a third term at the party congress.

Things started to go wrong just as the Winter Games opened, however. Xi met with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, on the sidelines of the opening ceremony and declared a "no-limits" partnership between China and Russia just three weeks before Putin launched his war of aggression in Ukraine. Media reports and commentators suggested that Xi had made a terrible [strategic blunder](#) with the pact, or may even have been [duped](#) by Putin entirely. Just over a month later, the omicron variant of COVID-19 arrived in China and quickly spread across the country, resulting in punishing lockdowns brought into stark relief across the globe with the paralysis of the financial capital of Shanghai for more than a month. With omicron's even more contagious sub-variant, BA.5, now also loose in the country, Shanghai and many other cities stand on the precipice of additional crippling lockdowns.

Nor have things improved in other areas. Xi and his Politburo colleagues are grappling with a stubbornly anemic economy in which all indicators of the traditional growth drivers—real estate, consumption, private investment, and, probably soon, even exports—are flashing red, and unemployment, especially among the key 16–24 age group, is running very high and likely to climb as universities disgorge a record number of

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fresh graduates into the job market. Even social stability is looking a bit wobbly, with protests, both physical and digital, breaking out in response to bank failures in Henan Province and homebuyers refusing to pay mortgages on their unfinished properties, respectively.

Consequently, it is not surprising that an array of [media](#) and other [commentators](#) have suggested that Xi Jinping may be in trouble, or even on the ropes, politically as he seeks an atypical third term as China's top leader. Such arguments rest on three basic assumptions about Chinese elite politics at present:

- Xi seized power in a hostile takeover or soft coup of sorts, and he has run roughshod over the economic reforms and political experiments that made up China's post-Cultural Revolution recipe for success.
- He has powerful detractors among the CCP grandees who see him and his arbitrary power as the problem, fundamentally disagree with his policy approach, and seek to weaken or oust him when his current term ends at the 20th Party Congress.
- Xi's mistaken policies are his Achilles' heel, stirring up the elite and popular dissent that his opponents need to achieve their objectives.

This paper will argue that each of these assumptions is fundamentally flawed. Instead, analysts and other observers should work from the assumptions that Xi is in a strong position going into the 20th Party Congress and that he is more likely to triumph than to be substantially constrained. Xi was "hired" by his Politburo colleagues and other influential party barons to do exactly the job he is doing, given their collective assessment

of the party's state of corruption, laxity, and decay at the time Xi took power, even if the medicine he has chosen to administer has proved stronger than they bargained for.

Through a blitzkrieg ideological crowning, anticorruption pogroms targeting enemies, and the dismantling of established party procedures, Xi has rewired or completely disrupted some of the regime's long-standing political patterns, rendering traditional models for explaining elite politics—such as factional, bureaucratic bargaining and generational cohort analyses—problematic, and perhaps obsolete. It is also the case that the policy choices the commentariat has branded as misguided or even ruinous may not be as damaging for Xi as they have suggested, especially given the velocity of changing circumstances and the unique lens that the Politburo tends to apply in evaluating both domestic and geopolitical tactical circumstances and the overall strategic landscape. Finally, the exact policy direction that Xi would follow under a "Xi unbound" scenario is unclear. The overall framing can be deduced from his track record thus far, but the specific trajectory of his approach almost certainly would not be the linear course that the caricature of him would suggest.

### **THE CORRECT FRAMING: THE SOLUTION RATHER THAN THE PROBLEM**

Although Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan is known within the party and abroad as "[Fire Chief Wang](#)" for his track record of assuming posts in which he has had to grapple with the regime's most problematic challenges, Xi may be more deserving of the sobriquet for taking on the top job in 2012. A decade on, it is easy to lose sight of the mess he inherited:

- The dramatic fall of onetime Xi rival

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and Politburo member Bo Xilai only months before Xi's accession pulled back the curtain for the Chinese public and the world on the depth of intra-party factional infighting and President Hu Jintao's inability to keep it in check.

- Corruption had become so rife that the leadership could not be assured that the regime's control apparatus would respond swiftly in a crisis. These concerns no doubt were amplified as the Politburo watched the Egyptian military stand idly by as former president Hosni Mubarak was deposed without a shot fired in early 2011.
- For what purports to be a Marxist-Leninist enterprise, the regime seemed ideologically moribund and largely directionless beyond a loose commitment to delivering economic growth to keep the CCP in power.

Such a state of affairs was deeply unsettling, and probably anathema, to someone like Xi—a “princeling” scion of one of the regime's founding fathers with a “born-to-rule” attitude and an idealized vision of the CCP from the pre–Great Leap Forward 1950s as a largely unified political force that was ideologically committed and generally supported by a public glad to be rid of the corruption and inefficacy of the previous Kuomintang regime. Consistent with this mindset, Xi embraces the notion that in a Leninist political system like China's, the top leader must personally control the key levers of power to effectively wield authority. His aggressive efforts from the beginning of his tenure to establish direct influence over the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and later the security services and party bureaucracy, all speak to his appreciation of this central organiz-

ing principle of the regime. In Xi's worldview, then, there is no room for the consensus-driven institutional bargaining approach that characterized the administrations of Hu Jintao and his predecessor Jiang Zemin. Instead of powerful, highly autonomous fiefdoms—described variously by China scholars as “[the control cartel](#)” or “[the iron quadrangle](#)”—Xi views these institutions as instruments to be wielded in an unflinchingly hierarchical world of CCP power and control. In fact, Xi's approach would seem to suggest that the notion that the CCP was on some sort of pathway toward inexorable institutionalization was a fallacy and, at least from his vantage, a dangerous exception to the rule.

Moreover, if Xi had any doubts with regard to the wisdom of his approach, serving for five years as Hu Jintao's understudy must only have affirmed his convictions. Under Hu, these institutions, while ultimately subordinate to party control, took advantage of their particular monopolies, mainly on expertise and the control of information flow, to establish vast operational gray areas within which they were able to exert substantial autonomy and therefore outsize policy influence. One need only look to the numerous occasions during Hu's tenure—China's 2007 antisatellite test, its 2011 test flight of the PLA's prototype J-20 stealth fighter during a visit of U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, and so on—when it seemed that Hu had little control over, and perhaps even little awareness of, what his military was doing.

Similarly, disgraced former security czar and Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member Zhou Yongkang, with his iron grip on the regime's vast security and intelligence bureaucracy, seemed to wield enormous power and influence given his bottom-ranked position on the PBSC, which then consisted of nine members. Zhou's apparent decision

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to initially buck a clear PBSC consensus to purge Bo Xilai, for example, highlighted his sense of empowerment. To be fair, Hu's struggles in establishing his authority probably had much more to do with Jiang Zemin's efforts to hamstring that process than with Hu's lack of awareness of the importance of doing so, but the result was the same. Xi's subsequent sense of urgency and willingness to provoke powerful regime constituencies to redress this imbalance immediately upon taking power highlighted his belief that Hu's timidity had done substantial damage to the authority of the office of the CCP general secretary and risked undermining the overall stability of the system.

Bo Xilai's dramatic collapse provided the impetus for Xi's subsequent actions, but it also seems to have been the thread that unraveled a much broader tableau of party intrigue. In fact, although the exact details remain cloaked (probably permanently) behind the veil of official CCP secrecy and opacity, what little the regime has revealed about the activities of the main "tigers"—party-speak for corrupt high-level officials—detained in Xi's relentless antigraft campaign in the early aftermath of Bo's demise gives a sense of the threat from Bo and others. Those details, along with some simple deduction relating to the basic mechanics of a Leninist authoritarian system such as China's, strongly suggest that Xi's actions were an understandable and reasoned response to a pervasive threat, rather than just a risky political gambit for his own self-aggrandizement. In each case, the actor in question was managing a key element of the CCP's ecosystem of control, but, through some combination of corruption and personal vainglory, was doing so in ways meant to advance his personal interests at the expense of the authority of the top leader.

By way of a brief review, Zhou Yongkang, through his seat on the PBSC and his position as secretary of the CCP's Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (CPLAC), oversaw the regime's sprawling coercive apparatus and the putative guardians of the regime—the "sword and shield" of the state in the lexicon of the former Soviet Union's analogue, the KGB. Although primarily tasked with tracking and subverting perceived enemies of the state—both within China and abroad—the security bureaucracy maintains a domestic monitoring function that, when deemed necessary, can even be turned on members of the top leadership. It was no surprise, then, that Xi moved quickly against Zhou loyalists in the security bureaucracy who maintained day-to-day oversight of such powerful capabilities. His victims included Liang Ke, then the head of the Beijing State Security Bureau—the crown jewel in the network of local provincial and municipal bureaus under the Ministry of State Security (MSS)—and even MSS Vice Minister Ma Jian, the ministry's long-serving counterintelligence chief.

Similarly, fallen PLA "tigers" Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong oversaw the military's personnel system and its operational forces, respectively. Both members of the full Politburo and the top uniformed officers on the CCP's Central Military Commission (CMC), China's military policy-setting body, they made up two points of the triangle—the apex being the party chief and CMC chair—that constitutes the formal linkage between the CCP and the PLA. This setup is particularly important in China's Leninist system because the PLA, rather than serving as China's national military, is instead the armed wing of the CCP. As such, its main function is to serve as the ultimate guarantor of continued party rule, as demonstrated most dramatically during

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the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. The fact that Guo and Xu, by selling office and military rank, were effectively creating a private army loyal to them within the PLA would be intolerable from the viewpoint of the party chief.

Finally, Ling Jihua, the former chief lieutenant for Hu Jintao and director of the CCP General Office, was also running a seemingly independent kingdom. It is unclear to what degree, if at all, Hu Jintao was aware of Ling’s corrupt activities, which may say more about Hu than it does about Ling. Regardless, what is clear is the sensitivity of the role of the director of the General Office. Best described as the nerve center of the Politburo, the General Office and its director oversee critical responsibilities, including setting the calendar and agenda for meetings of the Politburo and the PBSC, managing paper flow within those same bodies, and overseeing the personal security of top leaders and the compounds and facilities they live and work in. In recent years, the position also has taken on responsibilities somewhat analogous to a chief of staff in Western systems. As such, there are few more important functional offices in the CCP hierarchy.

There even has been some speculation—including strong hints from the regime—that the threat these individuals posed may have gone beyond just institutional fragmentation or laxity, and instead could have represented a danger to Xi’s very succession. Hong Kong and Western media accounts from the time were rife with stories alleging conspiracies among these actors, perhaps even amounting to a “new Gang of Four” (or five, depending on how one accounts for Guo Boxiong) in a reference to Mao’s key henchmen during the Cultural Revolution. Such notions probably are overblown, but it is not outside the realm of possibility that these officials, while not coordinating their efforts, may have been

working toward the shared goal of disrupting, or at least constraining, Xi’s rise. In fact, in a [2016 official release](#) of comments that Xi made in a January 2015 speech to a plenum of the party’s antigraft agency, he indicated that this cabal had “violated the party’s organization to engage in political conspiracies to immorally violate and split the party.”

Indeed, in the official list of charges against both [Zhou](#) and [Ling](#), there are intriguing references to the misuse of state secrets among the list of their offenses. There is little doubt that Zhou at some point was colluding with Bo Xilai, who, given his fellow princeling pedigree, Xi likely perceived as his only legitimate rival for the top leadership. Zhou was in a position to order the likes of Ma Jian and Liang Ke to gather damaging information on Xi, as [some reports](#) have suggested, and another [media accounts](#) have indicated that Zhou tipped Bo off regarding the PBSC’s secret decision to remove him from power. Therefore, the fact that Zhou was the first of the major “tigers” targeted by Xi upon his accession is hardly coincidental.

It is equally clear that Guo and Xu served as the instruments for Jiang Zemin to retain a strong hand in military affairs, to the detriment of Hu Jintao’s ability to consolidate power. It is not inconceivable, then, that the substantial networks of supporters in the PLA that would endure beyond Guo and Xu stepping down from formal office could represent a similar handicap for Xi. The massive turnover (85 percent) in [PLA representation](#) from the 18th to the 19th Central Committee strongly implies this concern from Xi. Moreover, the [party history resolution](#) passed at the Sixth Plenum was even clearer, with its bald admission that “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

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diminished the military's combat capacity, but also undermined the key political principle that the party commands the gun.”

As to Ling Jihua, as General Office chief, he would have had substantial sway in managing key personnel-related processes such as the coordination of the lists of candidates for the CCP central committee and the “straw polls” the leadership conducted to rank candidates for the Politburo in the run-up to the 17th and 18th Party Congresses. In fact, when the party abandoned the straw poll mechanism ahead of the 19th Party Congress, the [official explainer](#) indicated that a major reason was Ling's acceptance of bribes for votes in those two polls. [Media accounts](#) based on the ring of officially sanctioned leaks also alleged that Ling had misused his office's influence over the regime's praetorian guard to obscure the circumstances around the March 2012 death of his son in a Ferrari crash and sought Zhou Yongkang's assistance with that cover-up.

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that Xi had little trouble convincing the CCP's top powerbrokers to adopt his outlook on managing the party more strictly and to empower him to aggressively deal with its most existential crisis since 1989. Xi's pitch that his status as a seniormost member of the party's “red nobility” conferred on him sufficient stature to save the CCP from its many ills resonated in that moment of peril. Indeed, the party—and many of China's [other elites](#)—quickly embraced Xi's narrative of Hu Jintao's time in power as a “lost decade” for the country, though many of the antecedents of those troubles, especially burgeoning corruption within the PLA, stemmed from Jiang's tenure. True, these potentates miscalculated when they assumed that Xi, despite being a more dynamic leader than Hu, would respect the corruption and cronyism that

had shaped the rules of the game in the two decades that preceded his accession. Even with that hindsight, however, these denizens of the CCP system seem far less eager than foreign observers for the Chinese system to revert to a previous era. They and Xi appear to share a collective assessment that the only clearly identifiable period of maximum danger for the party now is in the rearview mirror. What may happen as a consequence of Xi's sometimes arbitrary power is yet to be determined, leaving them willing to hedge their bets on hanging together rather than hanging separately, at least for now.

In fact, just over the course of a few months in 2020, three nominally influential regime elites separately seemed to raise hopes about possible dissent in the party's ranks. Former CCP Party School professor Cai Xia, Tsinghua University professor Xu Zhangrun, and onetime property baron Ren Zhiqiang all criticized Xi for doing great harm to the country with his autocratic tendencies. Consistent with their writings and backgrounds, their complaints all made an indirect case for certain aspects of bygone eras: the heady political reform days of the 1980s for Cai; the CCP's dabbling with proto-legal reforms in the late 1990s for Xu; and the “go-go” heyday of Chinese state capitalism from 2005 to 2008 for Ren. But their grumblings did not turn out to be the spark that started a prairie fire. Cai was expelled from the party and exiled to the United States; Xu was detained for a few days and then stripped of his post and livelihood; and Ren was expelled from the party, investigated and tried for corruption, and speedily sentenced to 18 years in prison. It seems that a majority of CCP magnates still agreed with Xi that the unintended consequences of the reforms and crony capitalism of those decades still represented a greater threat to CCP rule than Xi's unbridled power.

The result was to put the entire high command on notice that no one was safe from the unfolding anticorruption campaign and that Xi intended to firmly establish his personal control over the PLA in the same way that Mao had done before him.

Viewed in this light, Xi's subsequent approach to managing the challenge seems much more collegial and pragmatic than the tyrannical [overreach](#) that some China watchers have suggested. In the security services, the subtle opening move in his gambit can be traced to the decision at the 18th Party Congress to downgrade Zhou Yongkang's security responsibilities from a PBSC-level portfolio to one managed by a member of the full Politburo. Meng Jianzhu succeeded Zhou as secretary of the CPLAC, but he did not rise to the PBSC with the contraction of that body from nine members to seven. Given Xi's status as the rising leader, this almost certainly was a consensus decision, although one that suited Xi's interests by cauterizing the immediate problem. Though he may ultimately have had little choice in the matter, Xi's apparent willingness to accept Meng—a well-known acolyte of Jiang Zemin—in the post also spoke to his pragmatism, and perhaps to a well-honed mastery of political tactics by not tipping his hand too early.

This is also consistent with the notion that Xi was prioritizing his efforts to tackle the biggest challenge, subordinating the PLA to his control, first:

- At the November 2013 Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee, Xi decided to include [in the public "Decision"](#) document the fact that the PLA would undergo a substantial structural reorganization, a prelude to the sweeping changes to the PLA's command system that have since been realized. Xi's predecessors had tried to initiate such reforms before but were always thwarted by the [political power of the PLA](#). Indeed, the establishment of a separate PLA Army headquarters equal to the military's other service com-

mands highlighted Xi's breakdown of the political power of the long-dominant PLA ground forces.

- Xi then conducted an artful piece of political stagecraft in November 2014 by taking advantage of the 85th anniversary of the 1929 Gutian Conference to convene an important meeting regarding the PLA's status as the party's army. The [resolution](#) of the original Gutian Conference established the principle of the PLA's subordination to the party and stated that the purpose of the military was "chiefly for the service of political ends."
- In his speech at the 2014 conference, Xi described the misdeeds of Xu Caihou in detail, making clear that most of the senior generals in attendance [were at least indirectly complicit](#) in the pay-for-promotion schemes that Xu, Guo, and other generals were running. The result was to put the entire high command on notice that no one was safe from the unfolding anticorruption campaign and that Xi intended to firmly establish his personal control over the PLA in the same way that Mao had done before him.
- This combination of disrupting the PLA's long-standing organizational networks through forced restructuring and the threat of imprisonment for corruption paved the way for Xi to launch further initiatives to bring the military properly to heel. These included the advent of the ["CMC Chairman Responsibility System,"](#) which emphasized the top civilian leader's grip over the military compared with the "CMC Vice-Chairman Responsibility System" under Jiang and Hu, in which their uni-

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formed notional subordinates had de facto control. With the sudden purge of two more senior generals for corruption on the eve of the 19th Party Congress, Xi capped his victory by shrinking the CMC's membership from the unwieldy 11 members it had for more than a decade to seven, further concentrating his influence.

With the military firmly in hand by 2017, Xi turned his attention to dealing with the security services in his second term. Xi made some initial forays during his first five years, jailing a senior vice minister of public security as part of the effort to bring down Zhou Yongkang, but he left the powerful security *xitong* largely untouched aside from taking advantage of retirements or transfers among senior police officers. The campaign has shifted into high gear since the 19th Party Congress, however. The first salvo was the arrest of another vice minister and concurrent chief of Interpol, [Meng Hongwei](#), in October 2018. But the campaign really took off with the launch in July 2020 of a Mao-style “education and rectification” campaign within the CPLAC:

- Official media accounts from the campaign's launch compared it with the CCP's Yan'an Rectification Movement (1942–45), which witnessed Mao's sweeping purges of the party ranks to establish his unquestioned position as party leader. For such a sensitive and major effort, it is striking that the lead actor has not been CPLAC Chairman Guo Shengkun, a close ally of former Vice President Zeng Qinghong and the last vestige of Jiang Zemin's hold on the sector. Instead, the campaign is being managed by Guo's technical subordinate, Xi lieutenant and enforcer Chen

Yixin, who already appears to be in day-to-day operational control of the CPLAC.

- The campaign has proceeded swiftly, taking down then head of the Shanghai police, [Gong Daoan](#), only a month after its inception. By the end of 2021, Gong and several others already had [stood trial](#) for their offenses, a break-neck pace for corruption cases to make it through the full judicial process in the Chinese system.
- Saving the best for last, in July 2022, the party finally put on trial former Vice Minister of Public Security [Sun Lijun](#) and former Justice Minister [Fu Zhenghua](#). In an ironic twist, Fu in better days supervised the investigation into Zhou Yongkang. Fu and Sun were charged with [colluding with each other](#) in anti-party activities, among other crimes, though Sun's case seemed the more serious. His bribe taking dwarfed that of Fu, and Chen Yixin [told](#) law enforcement and judicial officials in early July that the investigation to weed out Sun's influence “was not over.”
- The common thread in the cases of Sun, Fu, Gong, and others seemed to be their overlapping connections with Meng Jianzhu, suggesting that Xi may want to bring the rectification effort to a crescendo by cashiering Meng from retirement in the manner of Zhou Yongkang—or he at least wants Jiang Zemin to know that he could.

Therefore, the available evidence cumulatively establishes the following basic facts in contradiction to the idea that Xi has acted outside the Politburo's collective will with his accretion of power:

## Xi's rapid consolidation of power and centralization of political control was encouraged by the party's major interest groups.

- Xi's rapid consolidation of power and centralization of political control was encouraged by the party's major interest groups in response to their collective recognition of a fundamental crisis within the party organization and their acceptance of Xi's proposed solutions. Moreover, whatever their grumblings, they seem to have continued supporting his efforts despite numerous opportunities to quietly encourage or outright support minor rebellions.
- Xi has taken their endorsement and run with it to bring the regime's coercive apparatus back under the party's and his personal control.
- His success in that endeavor has served to dramatically reinforce and amplify his personal power and to limit the likelihood that the 2012 scenario—particularly as it relates to his grip on the system—will repeat itself. The danger that Xi, like Mao, will conclude that continuous purges are necessary to maintain his position is a strong possibility, but one that has not been tested sufficiently to arouse substantial opposition to his rule.

### THE FALLACY OF "PUSHBACK" . . .

Consequently, it is surprising that the spring of 2022 witnessed an explosion of speculation that Xi was on the defensive, or perhaps had even been forced to share or outright cede some of his authority for the management of certain key portfolios to some of his PBSC colleagues. Judging from the headlines, "elites," "reformers," and "angry entrepreneurs" who despise Xi's policies and megalomania were mobilizing to weaken or expel him at the 20th Party Congress. [Factional rivals](#) were also allegedly constraining Xi, and

leadership infighting explained [policy outcomes](#) or their absence. Even Xi's premier, Li Keqiang, supposedly had [overcome](#) a decade in political purgatory to [subtly court nervous foreign businesses](#) and right Xi's mistakes in maintaining the zero-COVID policy and cracking down on technology entrepreneurs and the property sector.

**"Linex" Rising?** The narrative around Li Keqiang's purported challenge to Xi is both the most pervasive and the least well-grounded in substance. The general idea is that Li objects to many of the regime's economic policies adopted in 2021 and wants a [different](#), less economically stifling approach to managing China's COVID-19 response than the zero-COVID policy. He supposedly is using the prerogatives of his office to adjust or even [overturn](#) those policies. Another part of his motive is to help restore the fortunes of the network of officials with ties to the party's Communist Youth League (CYL), a once-powerful political interest group under Hu Jintao that counts Li as its leading active member within the CCP's top echelons of power. According to [these accounts](#), Li hopes to position one of two CYL-linked leaders in the current Politburo—PBSC member Wang Yang or Vice-Premier Hu Chunhua—to ensure that "another premier who would be a counterweight to Mr. Xi" will succeed him.

However, this line of reasoning seems to ignore some of the CCP's core organizational principles, as well as the many changes that Xi has made to the regime's policymaking process and basic lines of authority. For example, the PBSC publicly affirmed the zero-COVID policy in meetings on [March 17](#) and [May 5](#), 2022, in both cases touting the slogan "[Persistence Is Victory](#)" (坚持就是胜利), a loaded catchphrase from the revolutionary period used frequently during the

## Li is also the feeblest premier in the CCP's history, and that is by Xi's design.

Cultural Revolution to justify Mao's political purges. The full Politburo also prioritized epidemic prevention over economic growth in its [July 28](#) meeting evaluating China's first-half economic performance:

- As a member of both senior CCP bodies, Li Keqiang is organizationally bound under the Leninist principle of democratic centralism to support and abide by these policies. That does not mean there cannot be differing views within the PBSC or the Politburo, but the debate is over when the policy line is set.
- The Propaganda Department's blaring of "Persistence Is Victory" across the first few pages of *People's Daily* on May 6; [the demand](#) in that day's PBSC meeting readout that the party must "resolutely struggle against all distortions, doubts and denials of our epidemic prevention policy"; and the CCP disciplinary agency's [separate commentary](#) linking the zero-COVID policy with the "Two Safeguards"—safeguarding Xi's "core" status and safeguarding the centralized authority of the party—made abundantly clear that moment had arrived. The instant quieting of grumbling about the zero-COVID policy thereafter underscored the point, and the fact that Li did not [wear a mask](#) on certain domestic trips or specifically mention the zero-COVID policy in meetings with foreign business executives did not change that reality.

Li is also the feeblest premier in the CCP's history, and that is by Xi's design. By way of illustration, the names of Jiang and his premier, Zhu Rongji, were often mentioned in the same breath, and the relationship between Hu and his premier, Wen

Jiabao, was so symbiotic that the phrase "the [Hu-Wen Administration](#)" was coined to refer to their policies. But Xi has transferred the locus of economic decision-making to new bodies like the party's Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, making the premier more of an operational executor of economic policy rather than the main designer of it. Under a separate initiative launched by Xi immediately after the 19th Party Congress, all members of the Politburo—including Li—now submit [annual end-of-year reports](#) on their work for his review and approval. Support for Xi's authority, a readiness to learn and promote his political thought, and members' initiative in seeking Xi's instructions when confronting major problems are among the evaluative criteria used for the reports, according to official media. To dismiss that exercise as simply pro forma would be to miss the point that such guidelines leave little room for Li, and probably his successor, to fundamentally differ with Xi's policy approach.

***Faulty Factionalism.*** Another flaw in the notion that other party magnates are challenging Xi or his policies is the trouble with factionalism. Factional analytic models can provide explanatory, and perhaps even predictive, power when contending camps of roughly equal power exist. Such tools helped China watchers understand leadership dynamics and their policy consequences in earlier periods in CCP history when those conditions were present. For example, given Deng Xiaoping's towering stature and accomplishments, it can be easy to [lose sight](#) of the substantial factional wars that occurred during his volatile years in power. Deng could get his way when it really counted, such as during the 1989 Tiananmen protests, and he did ultimately triumph over his more orthodox rivals at the 14th Party Congress in 1992.

## Jiang's staying power resulted in a recipe for policy confusion and drift in several important areas.

But it took him two party congresses with an extraordinary “National Conference of Delegates” sandwiched between them; two purged general secretaries along the way; and his last-ditch “Southern Tour” in early 1992 to finally cement that victory. The conservatives’ strength stemmed from several factors that undergirded their persistent challenge to Deng’s reform agenda:

- What they lacked in personal gravitas they sometimes made up for in numbers. Among Deng’s revolutionary colleagues generally recognized as the most powerful party barons during his rule, known informally as the “Eight Immortals,” a solid majority were of an orthodox to deeply orthodox political striping.
- Deng battled with them over economic policy and ideology throughout the 1980s. He became so frustrated with their meddling that he tried containing their influence with the creation of a political sinecure body—the Central Advisory Commission—in 1982, but that plan false-started initially, and the hard-liners were reempowered again in the tumult following the Tiananmen crackdown and the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- Deng’s fellow immortals, including his allies, also held substantial sway or outright control over several of the regime’s key policy fiefdoms and levers of power, arguably preventing Deng from ever achieving comprehensive structural dominance. Chen Yun had strong influence in economic policy, Peng Zhen in the security services, Song Renqiong in the party personnel apparatus, Wang Zhen in the PLA and the propaganda system, Yang Shangkun in the PLA, and

Bo Yibo and Li Xiannian in the state machinery.

The incomplete handover from Jiang to Hu manifested similar traits. Hu’s accession was incontestable since he had been anointed by Deng, but Jiang kept him in check by maintaining his status as the party’s de facto “core” leader with a nominal veto over Hu’s personnel and policy choices. Jiang’s allies also controlled key regime power centers, including propaganda, personnel, the party bureaucracy, and the military and security services, well past Jiang’s official expiration date, even as Hu tried methodically to boost his power. Jiang’s staying power resulted in a recipe for policy confusion and drift in several important areas:

- With the outbreak of COVID-19’s predecessor, the SARS epidemic, in early 2003, a newly minted Hu jostled with Jiang in the official media over [China’s approach to the contagion](#). Jiang’s forces advocated sticking to the “CCP playbook” of secrecy and denial, while Hu and Wen Jiabao sought transparency, making for a dysfunctional early response to the crisis.
- They also clashed over the vision for China’s next stage of development. Jiang embraced capitalist entrepreneurs and favored China’s wealthy coastal areas, while Hu advocated for the common people and tried to boost the fortunes of China’s vast rural areas with proposals such as the “New Socialist Countryside” endeavor. The resulting stalemate meant that urban-rural tensions simmered and the gap between rich and poor only grew wider.
- Even in foreign policy, the two men could not agree on how to present

Observers keen to spot signs of dissent have been (over) reading the tea leaves and drawing conclusions that have proved erroneous.

China's arrival as a nascent superpower on the global stage to the wider world. Hu favored a benign image of "[peaceful rise](#)," but Jiang worried this would limit China's options for recovering Taiwan and thought that "rise" could be viewed by other powers as threatening. The wasted opportunity made Xi's later leveraging of a much more powerful China to adopt a bolder, more confrontational foreign policy approach seem more jarring.

In short, when leadership infighting is running high, we know what it looks like. There are discernible signs, such as contending viewpoints in the otherwise monolithic state media or contradictory policy signals and directives. In the run-up to the Tiananmen crackdown, for example, hard-liners led by Premier Li Peng persuaded Deng to publish the infamous "April 26th editorial" in *People's Daily* that labeled the student demonstrations "turmoil" and a "counter-revolutionary riot." The piece was published while the party general secretary, Zhao Ziyang, who had been advocating restraint within the Politburo, was abroad in North Korea, in a brazen attempt by the hard-liners to bring the severe leadership split over how to handle the protests to a crescendo. In another particularly glaring case, state media briefly airbrushed Jiang from an official photo just before he surrendered his last formal title as CMC chairman in 2004.

There are no such indicators now, but that is not from a lack of trying. Observers keen to spot signs of dissent have been (over) reading the tea leaves and drawing conclusions that have proved erroneous. In one instance, an article by Institute of Party History and Literature President Qu Qingshan that appeared in *People's Daily* on

December 9 [was interpreted](#) as being critical of Xi because it mentioned Deng, Jiang, and Hu, but not Xi. As it turned out, however, the piece was Qu's essay from the official study reader from the Sixth Plenum, making it impossible that it was unsanctioned criticism. In fact, Qu then penned [a separate article](#) in the January issue of the party's theoretical journal praising Xi's contributions, and [another piece](#) in early July extolling Xi's diagnosis of the challenges and opportunities facing China in a complex geopolitical environment and praising the strategy Xi has crafted to manage them on the road to "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

The stories around Li Keqiang's opposition to Xi are likely rooted in another recurring phenomenon in Chinese elite politics: the often dubious leaking of supposedly secret information to foreigners by the losing side in leadership gamesmanship. Most of the reports about Li cite "government officials" or "[advisers close to decision-making](#)," for example, but their access to truly sensitive insights and their motivations are unclear. The period in the run-up to the 16th Party Congress offers a potentially helpful analogue here. Jiang's detractors hoped to force his complete retirement by disclosing "secret files" painting him in an unfavorable light. Their campaign started nearly two years before the congress with *The Tiananmen Papers*, allegedly secret documents that transparently questioned Jiang's legitimacy by claiming that his appointment as general secretary was the result of an [unconstitutional](#) decision by Deng and his fellow immortals. The same author followed up with *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files*, which cited "confidential reports" from the CCP's personnel office to [preview a new top lineup](#) without Jiang that wound up being wrong in almost every important detail. Although less clear-

There are certain telltale signs when a leader's power is building toward a crescendo in the run-up to a party congress.

cut, fugitive businessman Guo Wengui's [allegations](#) of corruption by Wang Qishan ahead of the 19th Party Congress ultimately had the same ineffective outcome, as Wang survived and took up the vice presidency.

In the end, Xi may never manage a truly "postfactional" leadership ecosystem, but something definitely has changed. One obvious element is the apparent lack of cohesion among once notionally powerful leadership constituencies. It is uncertain, for example, whether Li Keqiang is actually leading something like a CYL faction, as many of its most promising stars have been retired or sidelined, and those who remain, like Wang Yang and Hu Chunhua, do not seem to have traditional patron-client ties to Li. In fact, even during the CYL's heyday under Hu Jintao, it was never entirely clear that it was as tight-knit a grouping as Jiang Zemin's network. In Jiang's case, too, the model seems to have outlived its usefulness. In the recent hubbub around possible leadership infighting, for example, PBSC member Han Zheng [was said](#) to be pressuring Xi to oust his ally and Shanghai party boss Li Qiang given the latter's disastrous handling of the COVID-19 lockdown there. The implication was that Han, as the last vestige of Jiang's Shanghai mafia, was somehow trying to reclaim control of the city on the group's behalf. This seems inconsistent, however, with Han's fairly invisible tenure on the PBSC and the toll his survival of the 2006 scandal that engulfed his then boss and Shanghai party chief Chen Liangyu presumably had on his relationship with Jiang.

A final weakness with factional explanations is the way they caricature Xi as a monochromatic statist and ideologue who wants to reprise Mao's Cultural Revolution. Constraints by factional rivals must explain

regime policies that do not match the parody, because Xi is incapable of making adjustments in the face of new developments or information. So, when Li Keqiang promises relief for industries like tech and the property sector that previously were in the government's crosshairs, he is challenging Xi rather than playing the loyal tactical commander of a cratering economy that Occam's razor would suggest. Likewise, when Li held his unusual "100,000 cadres" video teleconference in late May to urge officials to stabilize the economy, it was [likened by some](#) to the "7,000 cadres conference" of 1962, where Mao made a self-criticism for the pernicious policies of the Great Leap Forward and afterward handed more power to his then successor-designate Liu Shaoqi and to Deng. It is more likely, however, that Li was expressing his frustrations with local officials' lack of action than with Xi's policy approach.

### ... AND XI'S TRAJECTORY TOWARD APOTHEOSIS

In the same way that we know what factional infighting looks like, there are certain telltale signs when a leader's power is building toward a crescendo in the run-up to a party congress. For Xi Jinping, many of those signs are now coming into view. In a nutshell, Xi has three objectives for the 20th Party Congress:

- He wants to secure a third term in office to remain China's top leader for the next five years, and possibly longer. The most obvious scenario is that he retains his current titles as CCP general secretary, president, and CMC chairman, though other possibilities—such as reviving the Mao-era party chairmanship—have been raised and could be possible.

## There is little doubt that Xi will continue as China's top leader past the party congress.

- He wants to run the table on personnel by stacking the Politburo and other senior leadership positions with his lieutenants. To facilitate this, and given his general settings as a transformative leader, he may also be looking for a more substantial turnover of the Central Committee to break with past patterns of stepwise advancement.
- He wants to be alone alongside Mao in the CCP's ideological cannon by truncating his current ideological formulation—"Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era"—to the pithier "Xi Jinping Thought." If successful, that might make it feasible for him to claim other laureates previously unique to Mao.

In each of these areas, Xi seems to be gaining ground. Despite the substantial headwinds in the economy and the other challenges the country is facing, there is little doubt that Xi will continue as China's top leader past the party congress. There have been few clues from official sources about his exact titles, though that may be decided when the leadership gathers for their secretive annual vacation and policy retreat at the seaside resort of Beidaihe in August. Trying to bring back the chairmanship could risk a substantial backlash. However, many observers said that would be the case when Xi eliminated the two-term limit for the presidency, and yet he has done so and gotten away with it. Other, possibly less fraught options include formalizing Xi's moniker as "the people's leader" (人民领袖) because it is unique to him, and so there would be no concern about passing it to a successor at some point. Xi's penchant for rules and the formalizing of procedure mean the title also could be added to the amendments to the party constitution that the party congress will consider.

On personnel, notwithstanding the speculation that he will have to make major concessions to his rivals, especially in the economic policy system, Xi seems to be doing very well in the power ministries that count when it comes to possible challenges to his authority:

- With the rectification campaign in the CPLAC system drawing to a close, Xi has made strides in tightening his grip on the security services even before the 20th Party Congress. After a somewhat awkward eight months serving just as party secretary, Xi ally Wang Xiaohong finally replaced Zhao Kezhi as public security minister in late June 2022. In a less visible but still important move, Lin Rui, who had spent much of his career in Fujian, where Xi had served for nearly two decades, moved from his position as the youngest and junior-ranking vice minister of public security to a deputy secretary-general of the CPLAC. Chen Yixin is the current secretary-general, suggesting that Lin may succeed him if Chen advances to higher office at the party congress.
- In May, Xi brain-truster and ideological muse Li Shulei was promoted to executive deputy director of the CCP Propaganda Department, lining him up for higher office. He may succeed current propaganda chief and Politburo member Huang Kunming if Huang is promoted or reassigned, but Li also has a strong background in anticorruption work, making him a possibility for the Politburo-level deputy slot on the party's disciplinary body.
- At 57 and 58, respectively, Lin and Li are comparatively young for their current jobs, and even younger if they are promoted to the jobs described above,

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lending some credence to the notion that Xi is seeking a broader rejuvenation of the leadership.

Xi has made his greatest strides on the ideological front. His stepwise campaign of ideological aggrandizement began in 2012, when he framed CCP history as comprising three eras, each spanning about 30 years: the establishment of the People's Republic of China through the death of Mao; the reform period under Deng, Jiang, and Hu; and Xi's "New Era." He then canonized this articulation at the start of his second term in 2017 by eponymously enshrining his ideological "thought" in the CCP constitution. That achievement helped him start erasing Jiang and Hu from party history and hinted he may seek to eclipse Deng. The Sixth Plenum's party history resolution did exactly that by describing Xi's "thought" [as akin to Mao's](#) while [downgrading Deng's](#). The effort accelerated again with a [July article](#) in *People's Daily* by party theoretician He Yiting that praised Mao Zedong Thought and Xi's contribution as a "leap in the Sinicization of Marxism," but made no mention of Deng, Jiang, or Hu, lumping them all under the ideological rubric of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

In addition, many provincial party chiefs have been extolling Xi's unique personality, charisma and wisdom in speeches marking their own local party congresses. Such behavior makes a mockery of Deng's ban on personality cults after Mao's death and sends a strong signal concerning the direction of the political winds. In his early July speech to judicial and security officials, Chen Yixin even noted that China is "lucky" to have Xi as the core of the party, the people's leader, and the commander of the armed forces. He further gushed, "Party secretary Xi Jinping has won high respect, he has the aura of lead-

ership, outstanding intelligence, personal charisma and a heart for the people. It has become a tremendous force to encourage and inspire our hearts and minds."

## XI JINPING'S "BLUNDERS": TOO EARLY TO SAY

Finally, many observers have suggested that Xi has made a series of policy mistakes that his detractors hope to seize on to constrain or even undermine his power. In fact, this framing of Xi's policy blunders has become so ubiquitous that it is discussed casually in media articles and other commentary as if it were established fact. The three most common policy errors cited are the zero-COVID policy, Xi's "no-limits" partnership with Russia and Vladimir Putin, and the crackdown on private business. But these characterizations at least lack important context, or, like the famous misquote attributed to Premier Zhou Enlai about the influence of the French Revolution, fail to understand that it is "too early to say." In other words, the policies are only mistakes in a meaningful sense if they are perceived that way internally and can be used by Xi's notional critics to bring about change:

- On the zero-COVID policy, at least two aspects seem to be underappreciated by the blunder school argument. First, whatever the associated social and economic costs, the policy makes sense to Xi in terms of some of his aims for the party congress. The March 17 PBSC meeting readout noted Xi's admonition that the principle of "people first, life first" should be paramount in the government's response. This formulation aligns with his effort to be crowned "the people's leader," leaving little room for argument. Second, there is no compelling evidence that other senior leaders

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disagree with the policy's appropriateness when it comes to avoiding a meltdown of China's underdeveloped hospital and health care system, the unacceptability of mass deaths in a party congress year if COVID-19 were allowed to run rampant, and Xi's contention that, barring a complete failure, the policy highlights exactly the contrast between Chinese governance and that of the "profligate West" the CCP hopes may appeal to others like the Global South.

- Xi's embrace of Russia, meanwhile, aligns with the Politburo's shared assessment of the geopolitical landscape. In their dialectical view, the United States is an implacable enemy out to stifle China's rise, making Russia the natural partner and Europe a critical swing actor. The outcome of the conflict in Ukraine remains uncertain, but China may see things tilting their way: Putin's military position has improved; European criticisms of China's stance have ebbed; and even America has avoided unnecessary trade and other escalation with Beijing to encourage its restraint in supporting Moscow. If a stalemate leads to a deal in which Putin keeps Ukrainian territory while receiving at least some relief from Western sanctions, the Politburo will judge that exposing the hollowness of Western threats and economic coercion will have been worth the modest reputational cost China has suffered by aligning tightly with Russia.
- The crackdown on the private sector may be more of a political decision than an economic one. Jiang Zemin's response to the rising clout of entre-

preneurs was to seek to co-opt them by letting them join the CCP. Xi judges that plan backfired and the entrepreneurs wound up corrupting party officials and otherwise running amok like robber barons in an inconvenient look for a Communist regime. Moreover, few in the Politburo would dispute that the platform economy companies posed real risks in areas like data security and the finance sector, or that overdependence on real estate to drive economic growth was a looming threat to China's campaign to break through the middle-income trap by 2035.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The potential policy consequences of the string of faulty assumptions outlined in this paper are numerous and potentially concerning. As the old adage goes, "Good analysis may not beget good policy, but bad analysis definitely begets bad policy." To give just a few examples, a belief that Xi hijacked the government rather than being given the keys by his colleagues risks encouraging policymakers to chase down rabbit holes about other possibilities rather than single-mindedly managing Chinese policies as they present themselves today. Similarly, overconfidence that Xi's policy choices are mistaken or even disastrous reflect a form of policy laziness requiring overcorrection when proven inaccurate. U.S. opposition to China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, commentary from senior U.S. officials about China scoring "own goals" in the region with its South China Sea island-building campaign, Donald Trump's quixotic trade war, and President Joe Biden's policy of "tactical avoidance" toward China all quickly come to mind.

## Xi's grip is firm and he is enacting a transformative agenda, even if not to the West's liking.

Moreover, the layering of misguided assessments can have cascading effects when grappling with uncertainty in real time. The recent debate over U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is illustrative. Several journalists and policy analysts underscored, for example, that Xi, seeking a third term, cannot afford to "look weak" or be "humiliated" by a Pelosi visit. Others suggested Xi might risk a disproportionate response because of his "misjudgments that have harmed the country and sparked internal controversy." Such concerns might be valid if Xi were on the defensive or not in full control of his system, but the absence of those conditions might prompt other policy responses.

History is again helpful here: Jiang Zemin was goaded into conducting dangerous missile drills during the last Taiwan Strait crisis in the mid-1990s, in part because he had not yet established his grip on the PLA and was confronted by revolutionary-credentialed generals whose stature in the military was far greater than his.

Contrast that with Xi's late July tour of an exhibition at the PLA military museum, where his second-ranking general gushed that "The purpose of holding the exhibition is to comprehensively reflect the extraordinary achievements made by Chairman Xi in leading the cause of a strong army in the new era, and to show the new style of the whole army loyally safeguarding the core and resolutely obeying the party's command."

In sum, Xi's grip is firm and he is enacting a transformative agenda, even if not to the West's liking. Unlike in previous periods, there is largely one voice making consequential decisions that will shape the course of geopolitical events. Therefore, governments must deal directly with Xi and his policies to mount effective responses. The Biden administration says that Xi's techno-authoritarianism, military muscle flexing, and efforts to subvert the rules-based international order require immediate attention. But Xi is betting that a dysfunctional U.S. government and society reliant on a slow-moving policy process and poor analysis of China's political and policy realities cannot keep pace with that challenge.