**Xi Jinping: the Game Changer of Chinese Elite Politics?**

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**Abstract**

Amidst China’s emergence as a global power, Xi Jinping is pushing through a range of ambitious reform plans that are reconfiguring both Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy. A fierce anti-corruption campaign has led to the dismissal of a large number of powerful figures; while a major effort has begun to bring party, state, and military power within Xi’s control. Many observers have interpreted these moves as radically altering the rules of game of elite politics, if not creating a personalistic political system. Our analysis shows that Xi’s corruption fighting and power centralization represent part of his state building project, in order to enhance the party-state’s capacity for the pursuit of governance objectives. We identify three rules regarding the Party’s power succession that would provide a critical test regarding how radically Xi is prepared to alter the Party’s key norms. The outcome of the 19th party congress in late 2017 would make it clearer whether Xi is in an effort to further institutionalise Party politics or turning the regime into his one-man rule.

**Keywords:** elite politics, Xi Jinping, Chinese politics, institutionalization, leadership transition

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"Recently, we have cracked down on corruption and punished both tigers and flies. This is in line with the people's requirements. It has nothing to do with power struggle. In this case, there is no 'House of Cards'."

* *Xi Jinping, excerpt from his keynote address in Seattle in 2015 (Martina, 2015)*

**Introduction**

With China’s re-emergence as a global power, its current President Xi Jinping has attracted enormous public and academic attention both domestically and internationally. It is widely argued that Xi is the most powerful Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping if not Mao Zedong (The Economist, 2014). His speed in consolidating top power since coming in office has surprised many China observers (Buckley, 2015; Page and Wei, 2015). Xi is also considered as a “game changer”, as his rule so far has led to a series of significant changes in Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy (Zheng and Chen, 2015). With China asserting itself in the East and South China Seas, while launching bold regional initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank and the “One Belt One Road” project, it seems that Xi’s proactive diplomacy has fundamentally shifted China’s grand strategy from Deng Xiaoping’s “keeping a low profile” towards the current “striving for achievement” (Yan, 2014).

Xi has an even more dramatic domestic agenda. Since taking power, he has launched an ambitious reform program to transform the party-state. A critical aspect of Xi’s governance approach is its high degree of power centralization. Through several institutional reforms, he has brought the party-state’s military, security, foreign affairs, and economic power hierarchies under his direct control. His anti-corruption campaign has arrested a large number of very powerful figures, including the former security tsar of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Zhou Yongkang. Many are worried that he is creating a cult of personality (Phillips, 2014), and that he has become as powerful as former paramount leaders, such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping (Zheng and Chen, 2015). This has led some China watchers to ask whether he is turning China into “one-man rule” (Brown, 2015a). Some even view Xi’s ambitious reform as a sign of the communist regime struggling at the end of its life. For example, David Shambaugh (2015) argues that Chinese communist rule has now reached its “endgame” and Xi Jinping’s “ruthless measures” are “bringing the country closer to a breaking point”. Michael Auslin (2015) likened Xi’s situation to “the flaring of a candle before it gutters.”

In this paper, we focus on Xi’s impact on China’s elite politics. The comparative politics literature has identified that most authoritarian regimes that collapse do so because of their inability to settle disputes among ruling elites, rather than overthrow by popular movements (O'Donnell*, et al.*, 1986; Svolik, 2012). In the past three decades, the CCP has made great efforts to develop a leadership succession system in order to maintain a relatively stable power balance among the party elites, and ensure predictable turnover from one ‘generation’ of leaders to another (Zeng, 2014a; Zeng, 2015). Yet Xi’s drive to centralize political power and challenge (some) corrupt leaders has greatly undermined some rules of the game, thus de-stabilizing elite politics in China. To break many of the formal and informal rules that govern elite politics may increase his power in the short term, but may damage party cohesion and bring its very survival into question.

This paper addresses this issue by analysing three dimensions of Xi Jinping’s objectives for, and approaches to governance: (1) his reform agenda and its implementation measures, (2) his anti-corruption campaign and its role into his overall governance agenda; and (3) his building up of power and what this means for the CCP and China’s political system. Moreover, we argue that it is critical to ascertain whether Xi is simply trying to build up (and thus prolong) his personal power, or whether he is strengthening his capacity to pursue a reform and governance agenda that is designed to improve the CCP’s rule. Indeed, power can be sought for the purpose of power, but it can also be sought in order to bring results.

From another angle, we argue that it is important to ascertain whether Xi is building institutions to enhance the CCP’s ruling capacity, therefore his personal power as an institutional actor of the system, in order to achieve the development and reform objectives it promised to the public, or whether he is building up his personal power by discarding some of the party-state’s institutions and institutional rules. The latter case would be likely to suggest that he is building up a personalistic dictatorship for himself, and it will see that China under him is degenerating from the post-totalitarian institutionalisation stage to a sultanist or patrimonial regime, according to Linz and Stepan’s typology (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Saxonberg, 2013).

Toward the end of the paper, we identify three potential changes to the Party’s power succession rules, which represent a critical test on how radically Xi is prepared to alter the rules of the game among the governing elite: (1) whether “67 stay and 68 retire” rule will be violated in 2017; (2) whether Premier Li Keqiang will serve a second term; and (3) whether Xi Jinping is making arrangements in expectation of his own retirement in 2022. If he appears to be seeking to rule beyond the scheduled succession in 2022, for example, then he is really bringing back the Maoist dictator spectre. We suggest that the 19th Party Congress, due to convene in autumn 2017, is the critical moment to test the robustness of the CCP’s institutionalisation.

**The Imperial President?**

Soon after Xi Jinping took top power, overseas media quickly took note of a decisive shift in the way the Party responded to various challenges. Most notably, the Party under Xi’s leadership appeared to have launched an ideological campaign to assert the Party’s control over ideological matters and tighten up freedom of expression (Moore, 2013). Universities and academics were instructed to ban discussion of human rights and other “Western” values such as free press and judiciary independence, allegedly “universal values” (Wee, 2014). A number of US reporters were denied visas, presumably due to their critical coverage of China (Somaiya, 2014). Civil society groups were harshly targeted for crack downs, including some apparently harmless women rights activists who are detained by Chinese police (Chang, 2015). Toward mid-2015, human rights lawyers (who were questioned or detained by the police) appeared to have become the latest group of victims of the state’s campaign (Duggan, 2015). For many observers, this series of domestic crack-downs represented part of Xi Jinping’s attempt to form an “imperial presidency” (Economy, 2014).

To examining these developments, it is necessary to appreciate the fragmentary nature of the Chinese political system (Lieberthal and Lampton, 1992).[[1]](#footnote-1) That would caution us from attributing everything that happens in China to Xi Jinping, or any other single player. These apparently heavy-handed measures towards intellectuals, journalists, and women activists, therefore, might have come from the Party’s more left-wing elements, who became aggressive during the window of opportunity when the new leadership team was still settling in.

Nevertheless, a more fundamental aspect of Xi’s alleged “imperial presidency” is found in the power concentration that has taken place. Since the 1990s, it has become the norm that the top leader of the Party, while holding the post of General Secretary of the party, will concurrently hold the Presidency and the Chairmanship of the Central Military Committee. Through the years, it has also become the norm that administrative powers are shared among the top leaders, most notably among the seven to nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) (Bo, 2007; Ding, 2015; Miller, 2016; Wang and Vangeli, 2016; Zheng, 2010).

While it is often the case that the President controls the main military, foreign policy, and personnel powers (Wang, 2013), the powers related to social and economic management have by convention controlled by the Premier. Internal security matters were typically left to another member of the PSC, who would at the same time serve as the secretary of the Party’s Central Political and Legal Affairs Committee. Such a power configuration has been characterized as “collective leadership”, with the top leader often seen as the “First among Equals” (Li, 2012, pp. 131; Li and Cary, 2011; Miller, 2008,pp. 73; Miller, 2009; Miller, 2011; Zheng and Chen, 2009, pp 22).

Xi Jinping, however, has taken steps to rise above his peers in the PSC, establishing clear personal dominance in the system. One example is the creation of a new National Security Commission. At the Third Plenum of the Central Committee held in autumn 2013, the CCP created two new leading bodies: a National Security Commission and a Central Committee Leadership Small Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reform. The two are very powerful bodies, and both are personally headed by Xi. The National Security Commission has the authority to oversee, coordinate and direct affairs that fall within the areas of responsibilities of a wide range of state, party and military organisations, including the Ministry of Public Security, the Armed Police, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of State Security, the People’s Liberation Amy’s intelligence departments, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its concerns range from national defense and domestic security to anti-terrorism and management of and responses to various nontraditional security threats, such as internet security and ideational and information security.

The Small Leadership Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reform, meanwhile, is tasked with the design and implementation of various reform plans. Its coverage of policy and institutional areas is equal, if not broader than that of the National Security Commission. Also headed by Xi himself, its deputy heads include the Premier and two other politburo standing committee members. Its members includes 10 politburo members, and nine others who represent the Central Party Secretariat, the National People’s Congress, the State Council, the National People’s Political Consultative Conference, the Supreme Court as well as the Supreme Procuratorate. The composition of its members indicates that it is the most powerful body for devising and implementing reforms. Its mandates are manifested in the six task forces within the group, which are charged with: economic and ecological institutional reforms, democracy and rule of law reforms, cultural institutional reforms, social institutional reforms, party-building institutional reforms and disciplinary institutional reforms. Xi’s leadership of this body shows that he intends to control the design and implementation of institutional reforms, even though he is also empowered with daily governance tasks, including heading the small leadership groups for foreign affairs and financial and economic affairs.

These changes seem to reveal Xi’s authoritarian (some say power-grab) leadership style, which differed from that of his predecessors. It is wide agreed that the Party’s top leadership body, the Politburo and PSC, under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (1992-2012) had operated within the norms of collective leadership, which emphasized power sharing with a few leaders to take control of separate portfolios (Li, 2012, pp. 131; Li and Cary, 2011; Miller, 2008,pp. 73; Miller, 2009; Miller, 2011; Zheng and Chen, 2009, pp 22). Such a power sharing arrangement also saw the top party leader leaving the economic and social management portfolios to the Premier (Zhu Rongji 1998-2003 and Wen Jiabao 2003-2013).

Xi Jinping, on the contrary, has made it clear that in economic and financial work, he will be the person that makes the final decision, instead of the current Premier Li Keqiang. During Jiang and Hu’s tenures, the PSC members heading the various state institutions also functioned more or less equally as a part of a collective leadership. But, on 23 Jan 2015, Xinhua reported that at the recently held Politburo meeting, the party groups of the National People’s Congress, the State Council, the People’s Political Consultative Conference, and the Supreme Court and the Supreme People’s Procuratorate reported their work to the Party Center (Xinhua, 2015). Some analysts took this change as another indication of Xi placing himself above his PSC colleagues who head these various state bodies (Xiaoshan, 2015).

Therefore, in a very short period of time, Xi made very decisive moves to acquire the full control of formal power and authority. Military, security, foreign affairs, economic reform, state building, economic policy making and social governance now all come under Xi’s personal purview. Together with clear signs of his allies being placed in powerful positions,[[2]](#footnote-2) and party machine and state media vigorously promoting his image and authority, even the US President Obama was led to conclude that Xi “has consolidated power faster and more comprehensively than probably anybody since Deng Xiaoping. And everybody's been impressed by his ... clout inside of China after only a year and a half or two years” (Mason and Holland, 2014).

**Taking on and Bringing down Tigers**

A second strand of Xi’s leadership strategy, separate from but related to power centralisation, is a massive anti-corruption campaign – “fighting tigers and flies.” Since late 2012, more than 70 officials at vice-ministerial level or above have been formally persecuted, including one ex-member of the politburo standing committee and two ex-members of the politburo. Zhou Yongkang (a former member of the PSC), Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong (two former vice chairmen of the Central Military Commission), and Ling Jihua (the previous director of the Party’s Central Office and a close aide of Hu Jintao), were the “big tigers” charged with corruption during this drive. In the space of a few months, seven officials at vice-governor level in Shanxi Province, were also sacked.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Similar moves were taken at lower levels, and at one point a some 300 positions in the provincial nomenclature system were left vacant (Sun, 2015). PetroChina, the nation’s top oil and national gas producer, lost its chairman in September 2013, together with four other senior executives. In March 2015, the firm’s second-in-command, who was appointed after the last round of investigation, was arrested for investigation (Hornby, 2015). Corruption fighting in the military has led to the downfall of more than 30 generals, with two navy generals committing suicide when they were formally investigated for alleged corruption. Guo Boxiong, the other Vice Chairman of the Central Military Committee serving alongside the now deceased Xu Caihou, was stripped of party membership and accused of corruption in July 2015. Rumors currently point to a large number of officials still under investigation, suggesting that more will soon be formally charged. Party secretaries of four provinces, believed to be linked to Ling Jihua, were rumored to have been targeted by anti-corruption probing. For a while, rumors even pointed to the likely fall of Li Yuanchao, an incumbent member of the Politburo and Vice State President.

Therefore, Xi’s anti-corruption campaign has been described as an outright purge (Brown, 2015b). Others see it as a struggle for power between different factions. For example, Joseph Fewsmith (2014) notes that “the campaign against corruption has clearly targeted the networks of Zhou Yongkang and Ling Jihua”. In this sense, Xi is seen as using corruption fighting to get rid of any potential challengers to his authority in the Party, to weaken other political factions in order to establish the dominance of his own faction, and above all, to ensure his (and his allies) personal control of the party-state’s top political posts (Keating, 2015).

**Power for What Purposes?**

However, Xi’s attempt to centralize power and fight corruption might instead be interpreted as part of a broader strategy to reform China’s governance system and economy. In late 2012, Xi Jinping entered office with a very strong reform mandate, as domestic public opinion and policy debates leading up to the Party congress clearly pointed to a need for more reform of China in every aspect. One of Xi’s first public appearances took him on a tour of Shenzhen (Chen, 2012). Probably the most symbolic city in China’s reform history, Shenzhen was the home of China’s first ‘special economic zone’, and where Deng made his famous “Southern Tour” in early 1992 to revitalise reform efforts. Therefore, Xi’s Shenzhen tour was clearly meant to convey a pro-reform message. After Xi assumed the Presidency in March 2013, official propaganda continued to feature suggestions that reforms to build a better economy and institutions for good governance were impending. The first policy plenum of the new party central committee, the Third Plenum held in the fall of 2013, delivered a high-profile reform document. It laid out a comprehensive list of plans and targets of reform that would be undertaken under Xi Jinping’s leadership (Xinhua, 2013).

A year later, the Fourth Plenum delivered yet another high-profile reform document, committing the Party to building a “rule of law country” (Xinhua, 2014). Among the other objectives, the “rule of law” aims to limit the power of officials and increase the transparency and accountability of government. It also intends to build a society characterized by good citizenship, fairness and harmony. In 2015, Xi rolled out a highly radical military reform plan, introducing the most sweeping military reorganization since the founding of the PRC. Among other changes, the plan will replace military region system with a new warzone system. It will also revamp the central department command system into a multi-department system and induce a fundamental re-organization of the services, including the creation of an Army service (Mulvenon, 2016). How these reforms conceptualise the ‘rule of law’ remains to be seen. However, all of these activities seemed to indicate that Xi is determined in terms of the structural and institutional reforms much needed for China’s economy, social development and state-building.

These activities, together with his very rapid actions against corruption, seemed to convey a sense of urgency to ensure China’s continued development and the Party’s responsibility to fix social problems and implement structural reforms. In this light, it would appear that Xi is centralizing party and state powers in order to push through institutional reforms that he sees as necessary for China. Indeed, the fragmentation of authority plagued Hu Jintao’s tenure as the nation’s top leader, with the expansion of the domestic security establishment under the “stability tsar” Zhou Yongkang as the most troubling. Many argue that Zhou Yongkang and his domestic security forces were too powerful and obstructed the progress of political reform during Hu Jintao’s tenure (Report, 2012). Now with a new power structure at the top, Xi hopes to overcome this problem and put all domestic security bodies of the party-state under his control.

The quick actions against the media, the dissident community, as well as the cyberspace expression are also part of Xi’s strategy to create a reform-conducive environment. Xi seems to believe that China’s reform has entered the so-called “deep waters”. Future reforms will be complicated and difficult. More importantly, it will definitely harm interests of certain groups and thus invoke oppositions. In this context, a strong, determined ruling party is necessary to put forward this reform. Thus, open challenges to the CCP’s legitimacy, either by dissidents, western media, or internet activism are certainly unacceptable and Xi has been more forceful in dealing with them. It is an issue of judgment as to what acts constitutes an open challenge to, or unacceptable attack on, the regime, but Xi’s position on this is firm. As such, he has taken decisive actions to maintain the one-party rule, such as the quick actions toward media and dissent community as mentioned. Similar to Chinese leaders since Deng Xiaoping, Xi has regarded regime survival as the fundamental goal of the Party.

In the same context, Xi may be seen as fighting corrupt officials in order to clear the way for his reform agendas. In recent decades, party leaders and their family members have increasingly formed ties with business people, and engaged in collusive acts leverage their political authority for private economic gains (Pei, 2015). This phenomenon has had troubling consequences for China’s political system. Politicians with influence over government projects, bank loans, land sales, or other economic resources often trade their influences with business people, and receive huge bribes and other forms of compensation in return (Pei, 2015). Many family members of officials often directly operate various types of lucrative business and rely on their access to political or government power to gain huge profits (Meng, 2014). Therefore, within China’s political-economic arena, large and extensive networks are formed that are often centred on important officials in the Party and government. They link together businesspeople, the officials’ followers or protégés in the power establishment, and family members. They became virtual kingdoms that wield tremendous power across the political and business arenas in the country.

Zhou Yongkang, for example, controlled a number of large power-money networks including the top leaders in several petroleum companies, officials and business leaders in Sichuan and Jiangsu provinces, and his family members. Ling Jihua, similarly, controlled power-money networks mostly formed by business leaders and officials from Shanxi province, his hometown where his brother Ling Zhengce had helped him build a small kingdom. The Ferrari racing car incident in March 2012 that killed Ling Jihua’s son and eventually two young females that were with him was a present to the son from a Shanxi businessman who wanted to gain Ling’s favour.

The large networks and tremendous political and economic resources they control became a serious threat to the Party’s ability to provide fair governance and introduce reform. They can even use their power to affect political decisions and challenge the power of the Centre. In 2011 and 2012, Zhou Yongkang and Ling Jihua were allegedly involved in a conspiracy to dispose Xi Jinping as the successor to the Party’s top position, and install Bo Xilai instead. Bo was the former party head of China’s metropolitan centre in the southwest, Chongqing, who launched a publicity campaign to shore up his prospect for entering the PSC leading up to the 2012 Party Congress. After his security chief fled to the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu, he was charged with corruption and other abuses, and eventually put into jail. The investigation against the internal security tsar Zhou Yongkang began in mid-2012, as the investigation of Bo’s case brought out some of these links among the three men.

Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign mainly targets government officials that have built formidable economic and political bases, from which they are able to wield influence and resist or block reform efforts. Soon after Xi took top power in November 2012, an official in Sichuan province was arrested in Xi’s anti-corruption hunt, formally opening the case against Zhou. Through 2013 and 2014, members of Zhou’s fiefdoms fell one after another, with Zhou himself finally charged in late July 2014. The offensive against Ling Jihua took a similar pattern – it started from the province where he and his brothers built their networks. Between 2013 and 2014, his brother Ling Zhengce, who was a provincial official, was charged for corruption. Subsequently, a large number of officials in the Shanxi provincial party committee were prosecuted, many of whom owed their career to linkages to Ling’s power-business network. Ling was eventually charged in December 2014.

Xi’s anti-corruption campaign, therefore, has not just brought down party oligarchs that have gone wildly corrupt, such as Zhou and Ling, but also the entire network of these individuals that penetrates central and local party and government bodies, as well as the business allies. As such, it not only enhances the power of Xi Jinping and the new party centre he represents, but clears away resistance and obstacles to the implementation of Xi’s reform plans. It is claimed that such party oligarchs and party-business alliance networks have to be destroyed or removed before it is too late in order to maintain the sound and healthy performance of the political system. Xi has seized the opportunity to do so, and it appears that he will build institutions to prevent similar networks from forming in the future.

Putting all this together, Xi’s reform strategy seems to build on the assumption that 1) China is now in need of an ambitious reform program (which he has seen to its devising), 2) the Party needs to centralize power in order to implement that program, 3) Xi needs to do what is required to make the Party and its leader to maintain effective powers and authority. For Elizabeth Economy (2014), Xi has “advanced himself as a transformative leader, adopting an agenda that proposes to reform, if not revolutionize, political and economic relations not only within China but also with the rest of the world . . .  If successful, Xi’s reforms could yield a corruption-free, politically cohesive, and economically powerful one-party state with global reach”. It is in this sense that Xi Jinping can be viewed as conducting the “the greatest political experiment on Earth” (Ash, 2015). He is “using the tools of Mao to become a Deng Xiaoping 2.0,” to take on vested interests and acquire power in order to push through much-needed legal and economic reforms (Williams, 2014).

**Pitfalls Ahead**

Nonetheless, determination and blueprints are hardly equal to achievement of desired outcomes. Xi’s approaches to reform and governance are subject to potential set-backs and defeats. Most notably, power concentration could paradoxically be detrimental for the implementation of reforms. In the earlier years of China’s reform, it was the decentralisation of power that stimulated various regions in China to embark on various policy and institutional experiments that eventually grew into formal reforms adopted by the centre (Mukand and Rodrik, 2005; Qian and Weingast, 1996; Rawski, 1995; Roland, 2000). With power taken away and put into the hands of the Centre, local agents of the Party and state will lose the incentive to aggressively pursue institutional changes or reform in general.

While reforms during Deng Xiaoping’s time mainly grew out of local institutional innovations, Xi’s reform strategy aims to provide a powerful and clear vision and road map for the needed reforms, an approach that the policy circle in China calls “top-level design” (*dingceng sheji*). The two documents unveiled at the Third and Fourth Plenums of the new central committee represent two such “top-level designs” that the Party has offered for further reforming China’s economic as well as social, political and government systems. Taken together, the two plans lay out more than 500 measures of institutional reform and institution building, for example, optimising administrative divisions and streamlining governmental organs. A wide range of government agencies or groups of them have been tasked with developing more detailed implementable plans for some of the reforms put forward by the two plenums. Through 2014 and 2015, China’s press reported the completion of some of these plan-developing tasks, but overall, many observers are still left unconvinced as to whether the intended reforms will produce their desired results (Naughton, 2014).

In pushing forward his governance and reform agenda, Xi has empowered and relied on Party institutions. Many reform projects were created and coordinated by Party institutions, most notably through the Party’s various small leadership groups. To some extent, the CCP has turned from a political body into an executive body, while the State Council – China’s cabinet – has been greatly sidelined, including its leader Premier Li Keqiang. The mix of party vs. state powers within the system, and the weakening of state institutions, will not bode well for political development and institutional building in the long run – excessive centralization of power, for example, is a key problem.

The CCP’s centralisation of power might lead to the concerns over whether a powerful party would be accountable to itself. Needless to say, this centralisation of power is made at the expense of state institutions. This will no double undermine the influence and authority of those governmental organs, for example, the State Council. Making the Party taking over government administrative functions is indeed bringing back the systemic malfunctions of the Mao Zedong’s era. Under Mao’s rule, power was often centralised in the first party secretary at different levels of the political system. This centralisation tended to lead some sort of personal dictatorship by the party chief without any checks and balances. As a result, a large number of wrong polices were made during Mao’s era.

This was precisely why Deng Xiaoping (and other leaders such as Zhao Ziyang) started to explore the separation of power between the party and the government. It seems that the line between the party and the government starts to become blurring again under Xi Jinping’s rule – in order to drive reform progress, Xi is taking the risk of making the Party too powerful and too infringing. If Xi intends to build what he called a “modern governance system”, then he will need to find a way to rationalise such skewed power distribution within the system before institutional malfunctioning prevails.

While bringing down corrupt officials is winning popularity for the new leadership, corruption fighting has created a sense of fear and insecurity among the officialdom. That has dampened officials’ and civil servants’ work morale and led to a greater degree of risk aversion among them. This can lead to slower progress in implementing reforms. Most importantly, Xi’s anti-corruption campaign presents the dilemma between popular legitimacy and party cohesion that the CCP is facing (Zeng, 2015). In contemporary China, corruption has been considered to be a leading threat to the CCP’s legitimacy (Zeng, 2014b; Zeng, 2015) as it has seriously deteriorated the positive image of the CCP.

Yet the Party during Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao’s time was unable to control the exacerbating corruption, although both pledged to fight it hard. Xi’s campaign has been much stronger, and highly determined. This certainly helps Xi’s leadership to win domestic support, at least in the short term. However, in order to gain legitimacy in the long run, the anti-corruption campaign needs to be separated from power struggle (Zeng, 2015:192). As mentioned, many consider this campaign as a way to attack political enemies. Xi also directly responded to this kind of argument that anti-corruption campaign “has nothing to do with power struggle. In this case, there is no 'House of Cards'" (Martina, 2015), as we quoted at the beginning of this article. In this regard, the party needs to at least convince the society and the party that this campaign is not related to power struggle.

More importantly, this campaign has potential costs in terms of the internal stability of the Party and bears great risks for Xi’s own power. A massive anti-corruption campaign to go against the retired senior leaders such as Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou, and Guo Boxiong and their followers would deal a great blow to the power networks and the factions they represent. This will greatly unsettle intraparty power balance, provoke discontent from those under attacks, and threaten party unity. It might even increase the danger of backlashes against Xi Jinping and his allies.

Furthermore, since many officials, including the senior leaders that have retired, are all susceptible to corruption charges against themselves or their family members, Xi’s apparently unstoppable anti-corruption campaign might manage to turn him into the enemy of everyone. As Zheng Yongnian and Chen Gang (2015:6) point out, “Xi’s ruthless anti-corruption purge has met strong resistance from former leaders.” This ambitious campaign therefore requires a careful balance between forceful actions and credible assurance of security for powerful party seniors, as well as the majority of party members.

Institutionally, the corruption fighting campaign has seen a great expansion in the power and reach of the Party’s disciplinary machine, the Central Disciplinary Committee. The Committee’s working teams are now conducting investigations in almost every major state and party organization, including the National People’s Congress and Central Party Propaganda Department. These developments are raising (both international and domestic) concerns that the disciplinary arm of the Party is becoming too powerful and is destabilising the power balance of the system (Lam, 2014).

**Rolling Institutionalisation Back or Forward?**

For observers of Chinese elite politics, the time since Xi Jinping came into power has been rather exciting. His aggressive approaches to governance and reform have challenged many of the formal and informal rules of Chinese elite politics. This has led some to argue that he has broken the traditional norm of collective leadership that was established by Deng Xiaoping (Zheng and Chen, 2015). Xi has personally controlled a far greater range of state and party institutions than his predecessors such as Hu and Jiang, with his power ranging from national security, socioeconomic and institutional reform, economic policy making, and many others (Economists, 2014). In fighting corruption, he appears ready to bring down any of the party’s senior leaders.

Since 1980s, Deng Xiaoping has taken impressive efforts in limiting power struggles and restricting punishment given to those who lost out in order to avoid deadly power struggles and political purges during the late Mao period. For example, while removing Hu Yaobang from the position of General Secretary in 1986, the latter was allowed to retain his seat in the Politburo. Since 1989, no PSC member has lost his job or suffered corruption charge, and no PSC member has suffered jail terms since the Gang of Four in 1976 (sentenced in 1981). Clearly, the arrest and legal persecution of Zhou Yongkang has broken this unspoken rule, and if PSC members could be arrested, this means that no one in the system – no matter how senior they are – is safe from the fiat of the top leadership. Needless to say, it also breaks the informal convention that retired leaders will not be charged.

The authority personally collected by Xi, and this revision or abandonment of these informal rules, has led some to argue that China’s elite politics is being deinstitutionalised. In this article, institutionalisation refers to the creation and perpetuation of such rules that “stipulate how and by whom leaders are selected and removed from power” (Frantz and Stein, 2013:2). In this context, with Xi’s power gains, the norm of a collective leadership and some of its rules, some suspect, are jeopardized, with China entering a period of ‘strongman’ politics (Zheng and Chen, 2015). This argument is considered to be premature by other observers (Sheng, 2014). Alice Miller (2015), for example, argues that “Xi is still operating well within the trappings of collective leadership”.

Instead of seeing the rise of a new strongman politics era, we argue that Xi’s power centralization and other acts in fact highlight the nature of elite politics in the era of ***post***-strong man. The major difference among the top leaders in the strongman era and post-strongman era is their power source. In the strongman era (e.g. the eras of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping), the power of the leader came from their personal authority established in the revolutionary era, rather than their institutional posts. Indeed, Deng Xiaoping had never been appointed as the head of the state or the Party. This, however, did not prevent him from being the most powerful leader in China.

On the contrary, top leaders in the post-strong man era all rise from the bureaucratic system. Their power comes from their institutional posts. In order to consolidate their power, they have to strengthen, rather than undermine institutionalisation (Zeng, 2014a; Zeng, 2015). Precisely because Xi’s power is granted by his institutional posts rather than personal authority, he needs to rely on formal rules, executing his plans through formal Party processes, such as the National Security Commission and the Party’s leadership small groups. In this sense, the creation of new party bodies and agencies as well as restructuring power configuration among various party and state agencies suggests a move by a leader (in the post-strongman era) to strengthen his power by further institutionalisation – an act of state or party building indeed.

Although Xi has indeed broken several informal rules, most of these rules are at the operational level – for example, having the Premier heading the Party’s economic policy making – and are also fairly recent. It is simply too early to adjudicate whether the core norms of collective leadership system have been broken. The power succession system, although still evolving, is predicated on the fact that the elite are regularly replaced, with the attendant arrangements developed through the several rounds of leadership succession since the 1980s. Following the initial efforts of the Deng era, in the past three decades, the CCP has made impressive efforts to institutionalise this leadership transition system in order to maintain a regular rejuvenation of political elites (Zeng, 2014a; Zeng, 2015).

More specifically, throughout these years two major rules have been adopted to ensure this routinized turnover: term limits and age limit (Zeng, 2014a; Zeng, 2015). Term limits are ruled by the state constitution, which requires that the state President and Premier can only serve for two terms. Compared with term limit, age limit is more informal, and has not been made explicit regarding the top offices. But a rule of “67 stay and 68 retire” has governed the Politburo and the PSC, so that members of these two bodies cannot start a new term if his or her age is above or equivalent to 68 (Miller, 2016; Wang and Vangeli, 2016).

Developments under Xi Jinping might have altered the power distribution among various bodies or political players within the system, but they have not yet changed these patterns of regular elite turnover, a key party institution. If elite turnover is still to be expected, however more personal control Xi acquires during his tenure, he and his allies will remain powerful only during the time they serve. Political power will be passed to the next cohort of leaders, if the regular leadership transition occurs as it has in the past. We therefore propose three critical issues to observe whether the core norms are de-institutionalised or not.

First, at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, it will become clear whether the PSC members will follow the rule of “67 stay and 68 retire”. By then, except for Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, all other PSC members will exceed 67, and thus, are supposed to retire according to the age limit rule adopted since 2002. Currently, there is some speculation that Wang Qishan (China’s anti-corruption tsar and Xi’s close ally) might retain his PSC membership in 2017 because of his unfinished anti-corruption campaign. If this is true, it will translate into a major break from the norm of regular and predictable elite turnover established in the past decades.

Second, between 2017 and 2018, it will become clear whether Li Keqiang will serve a second term as Premier. Since 2002, the clear power sharing patterns between the President and the Premier appears to be the rule. Both form a duet that serves two consecutive terms as the anchor of the political system. Under Xi Jinping, we have witnessed the shift of some key portfolios away from the Premier to the President/General Secretary. Baring a major health failure or other unpredictable factors, if Li fails to serve a second term as the Premier, this might further weaken the power-sharing norm between these two positions, while enhancing the concentration of authority in Xi as top leader.

Third, and most importantly, when the 20th Party congress meets in 2022, Xi will have passed the retirement age of 67 for the Politburo and PSC, and he will have served two terms as President by the following spring. If the rule of political exit formed since the 1990s holds, Xi is supposed to hand over his power at that party congress. In Deng and Jiang’s cases, at one point both relinquished most of their formal posts but continued to exert influences without sitting on the PSC or being the nominal leader. Such a scenario would amount to a semi-retirement that Xi could possibly emulate. But if, in 2022 Xi decides to formally retain his recently acquired powers, this will be the single biggest indicator of his achievement of an “imperial presidency” and becoming as powerful as Mao or Deng. At the 19th Party congress in 2017, there will be signs whether Xi plans to retire in 2022 – a potential successor will need to be put in place, for example. If such signs fail to appear, that will greatly raise the likelihood of Xi refusing to retire in time.

**Personalistic Dictatorship or Muddling Through?**

Theories of post-communism suggest that due to the weakening power of communist ideology to maintain the one-party rule, these regimes will go through an institutionalisation stage in order to deliver governance goods (Saxonberg, 2013). China since the 1980s would be categorized as undergoing such a process, delivering socioeconomic development through institutionalisation. Such a regime, however, will eventually enter a frozen or mature post-totalitarian stage, when it is ripe for breakdown or democratisation. A personalistic dictatorship, or a sultanist regime in Linz and Stepan’s terminology, represents a typical freezing or frozen post-totalitarian regime typology (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Saxonberg, 2013).

If Xi is abolishing and defying key party rules to enhance his personal power, this might mean that the Chinese regime is entering the frozen post-totalitarian stage and becoming a personalistic dictatorship. This might suggest that an explosion will be inevitably, when the public gathers sufficient energy of revolution, or an implosion, when the system collapses due to internal struggles. If, however, in abolishing certain rules, Xi still replaces them with new rules, his reforming and state building programs may amount to the regime’s further effort of institutionalisation. After all, rules are subject to change, as long as changing rules is considered legitimate by the party elites. There might indeed be sufficient space for Xi to justify the remaking of the elite or regime rules, including those that govern exit from power and elite replacement. This way, Xi might be viewed as a strong leader attempting to remake rules, including introducing new rules.

Firstly, while scrapping the 67-up-and-68-down rule, if Xi makes it clear that a new and reasonable rule is put in place, such an act might become acceptable. He can, for example, propose or set 70 as the new retirement age (which will in fact not be a new rule as it was the retirement age accepted in the 1990s). But the key is that Xi and his followers need to follow this rule – when Jiang Zemin and Zeng Qinghong introduced the age limit rule, they followed the rule to retire in the end. For sure, this will be an attempt to manipulate the existing rule and thus harm the effects of institutionalisation in the short run. However, if this change could turn this informal “67-up-and-68-down” rule into a written formal rule, it may be a positive change to China’s institutionalisation in long run despite its defects.

Secondly, if the current Premier is transferred to a different post after serving only one term, Xi can invoke the precedents in the 1990s, when Li Peng as the Premier was transferred to be the head of the parliament, and Li Peng’s successor as the Premier, Zhu Rongji, served only one term and then retired. Indeed, a premier serving two consecutive terms alongside the same President has only occurred once so far, in the Wen Jiabao case between 2003 and 2013, and there is no explicitly made rule that a premier *must* serve two terms. Yet, as we mentioned above, Xi needs to convince the party and the society why this change is necessary and, more importantly, institutionalize the new rule.

In other words, in all these scenarios, changes to the existing rules may happen as the Party-state’s ongoing institutionalisation. As long as the macro institutional framework of predictable elite turnover is maintained, the system may still claim a certain amount of resilience. But revising and remaking rules will be highly difficult, or even risky. Changing these rules may lead to the perception that the leader is becoming too powerful and is ready to use his power too arbitrarily. To the extent that such perception will likely demoralize the officialdom and weaken their faith in the system, the top leader might deal a big blow to the health and sustainability of the system. In dealing with these and the many other thorny questions in reforming China and building party and state institutions, Xi as well as his party has to, as always, muddle through.

Above all, despite many eyebrow-raising developments, this paper argues that it is too early to accurately infer the implications of Xi Jinping’s various acts for China’s elite politics. The actual impacts of Xi’s reform on China’s institutionalisation need to be tested over three key factors that this paper proposes: “67 stay and 68 retire” rule, Premier Li Keqiang’s second tenure, and Xi Jinping’s departure in 2022. The 19th Party Congress in late 2017 will reveal a clearer idea about the future direction of Chinese elite politics.

China’s rise has significant implications for the future world order and the West, so does its leaders. The development of Chinese elite politics certainly deserves more attention given the core role of its leaders in the highly centralized power system. After all, whether Xi succeeds in building a more sophisticated and effective governance system for China, or whether he simply ends up centralising power but contain and repress the country’s economic and social vibrancy as well as the party-state itself, means a great deal to China’s own future and, by extension, the rest of the world.

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1. This paper is an analysis of contemporary development in China’s elite politics. We have avoided building a single bloc of literature review *per se*, but instead engaged academic literature wherever the literature can inform our analysis or our analysis holds implications to the literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. His key protégés, loyal supporters, and allies fall into several groups: those with a Shaanxi background (his hometown), those with a Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai background (provincial units he served earlier in his career), and those with a Tsinghua University, where he went to college and obtained his Ph.D. degree, background(Li, 2014a; Li, 2014b; Li, 2014c). In the military, they mostly hail from the Nanjing Military District, especially those generals rose from the 31st Army of that military district, which is stationed in Xiamen City, where he served as a vice mayor in the 1985-1988(Bo, 2014; Bo, 2015a; Bo, 2015b; Bo, 2015c). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The ranking system of Chinese government officials is complicated. A person holding a vice provincial governor rank, more often than not, is serving at one of the many posts in the provincial party-state other than serving as a vice governor. Each province, at any given time, should have 30-50 serving officials on this rank, although probably less than 15 are considered powerful (within the provincial context). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)