

This essay presents a retrospective examination of China's elite politics during Xi Jinping's ten years in power. It focuses on the following questions: Why does Xi Jinping prefer to confront, rather than accommodate, the cadres in his own regime? How has he been able to achieve his goals of leadership reorganization and cultivation of new elites? How has China's elite politics been remade along with Xi's concentration of power? And, to touch on the latest developments in elite politics ahead of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), why does the belated emergence of elite resistance to Xi's plan of taking on a third term have little chance of success or change the dynamics of China's elite politics going forward? The essay positions CCP elite politics in an institutional context that is defined and framed by China's political regime, and it argues that the nature of the regime requires Xi to confront his cadres to achieve his goals. At the same time, the same regime poses huge dilemmas to both Xi and his rivals.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping has been busy since coming into power in the fall of 2012 in terms of struggling with his adversaries, especially those in powerful positions in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). To Xi, these adversaries seem not less dangerous than the United States or Chinese political dissidents as they pose even more immediate threats to his own power. This struggle against his comrade-cadres has provided the dynamics for China's elite politics in the recent decade. The same struggle also has, to a considerable extent, dominated the reshaping of China's political, social, economic, and even foreign-relations landscapes during the Xi era.

Xi Jinping confronts CCP elites: The remaking of elite politics

Xi Jinping has two strong motivations to struggle against his own comrades. The first concerns power distribution. Xi rose to power from a weak power base, and thus he urgently needed to build up his own troops of loyalists within the party-state system, especially in its highest echelons. Equally important, to avoid remaining a puppet leader or risking losing his position to those who had selected him, he has had to concentrate power in his own hands to remain solely in control. Although such a power game may exist in every political system, within the CCP it is a game of life-and-death. In fact, the nature of the Chinese regime requires any new leader to concentrate power; those who do not do so, i.e., Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang or do so unsuccessfully risk falling from power, i.e., Hua Guofeng and Hu Jintao (who was only partially successful). When Xi Jinping was selected as CCP general secretary, it was expected that he would likely follow the path of either Hua Guofeng or Hu Jintao. Instead, over the last ten years,

Xi has proved himself to be a truly qualified Communist dictator in synch with the nature of the regime.

Therefore, elite circulation and the concentration of power are two distinguishing characteristics of Xi's regime.¹ The story of Xi's concentration of power into his own hands is well-known to those who follow Chinese politics, hence we will not repeat it here. With respect to elite circulation, one needs merely to examine one indicator: With the beginning of the new term of provincial party committees in June 2022, among the nationwide total of 281 standing committee members (省委常委),² only seven, or 2.5 percent, attained vice-ministerial posts prior to Xi's coming to power. In other words, 97.5 percent of the elite were promoted to provincial party committee positions by Xi. It helps indicate that the extent of cadre replacement under Xi has been extremely wide.

It might be argued that such elite circulation is due to the age ceiling for cadre retirement. But in fact, Xi has only selectively implemented the norms for retirement. In both the 2016-17 and 2021-22 rounds of provincial leadership reshuffling, for example, some younger cadres, mainly those with Communist Youth League (CYL) backgrounds, were forced to semi-retire to relatively marginal positions as members of the provincial people's congresses or the provincial Chinese people's political consultative conferences even though they had not yet reached retirement age. An extreme case is that of Yang Yue (杨岳), former No. 2 leader in the CYL who became a vice-ministerial leader at the age of 37 as a rising political star under Hu Jintao, who was then forced to semi-retire in November 2021 at the age of 53.³ There is rich evidence to show that Xi's elite-circulation measures have changed some significant norms in CCP elite politics, but space constraints here limit this discussion.

Xi's second motivation for confronting CCP elites is due to his deeply held political beliefs about how the CCP regime operates and, correspondingly, how it governs China and deals with the outside world. Prior to Xi, China basically followed Deng Xiaoping's political program, which can be summarized as "repressive capitalism," combining political repression (to monopolize ruling power) with the embrace of global capitalism (to make the country "rich and powerful").⁴ This is a program with tremendous internal tensions, primarily because, in order to enable global capitalism to serve the needs of the CCP monopoly of power, some pluralist elements must be allowed to creep into China's system of governance. In leadership politics, the limited pluralization, characterized by oligarchic shares of power, require political norms to

¹ The essay follows the intellectual tradition of Vilfredo Pareto in using terms such as "elite circulation."

² The author's database. Here "average standing committee members" refer to those CCP civilian provincial standing committee members who are not committee secretaries. This figure includes those who have died.

³ For Yang Yue's career, see <https://baike.baidu.com/item/杨岳/12067>.

⁴ Guoguang Wu, "Repressive Capitalism as the Institutional Crystallization of China's Transition," in Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne, eds., *China's Transition from Communism: New Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 188–210.

negotiate the sharing of power. These tensions have created huge liabilities for the regime, especially in dealing with the pluralist elements. To reduce these tensions, Xi has sought to remake China to be consistent with his own political ideals, whereby the “founding mission” of the CCP is not forgotten (不忘初心).⁵ In other words, Xi is seeking to uphold CCP ideals while at the same time overcoming those pitfalls brought about by China’s capitalist engagement.

How to define the CCP’s “founding mission,” however, depends on both the nature of the CCP regime and who is holding power within the CCP. In the Dengist era, Deng Xiaoping and, later, primarily Jiang Zemin, defined the CCP mission to be making China rich and powerful, thus justifying their policies to transform the elite composition and some norms of elite politics, ultimately strengthening their own paramount positions. Xi Jinping now also utilizes his own political principles to justify his program to remake elite politics and to support his own concentration of power. To overcome the capitalist pitfalls and to resist any checks and balances as required by a democracy, Xi has emphasized a renewal of the CCP through “self-revolution” (自我革命), a slogan that can be compared to Mao’s “continuous revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat” (无产阶级专政下继续革命) that in theory supported the Cultural Revolution – a time when many thousands of CCP elites were purged. Like Mao, Xi is not shy about purging CCP elites, as indicated by his matching the former slogan to the slogan of “holding the knife with the blade inward” (刀刃向内).⁶ These slogans clearly reveal that Xi is primarily targeting the CCP elites. The next section will analyze what he has done during the past ten years to introduce the emergence of a new dynamics in elite politics.

The same regime at work: why has Xi overwhelmed rival CCP elites?

Cadre corruption is one of the nastiest aftermaths of the Dengist program. As soon as he came to power, Xi began to remake CCP elite politics by launching a powerful anti-corruption campaign. Only several weeks after Xi’s inauguration at the fall 2012 18th Party Congress, was a member of the new Central Committee investigated.⁷ The resultant purge turned out to be a prelude to the largest storm in Chinese high politics since the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, leading to the imprisonment of Zhou Yongkang (周永康), a newly retired Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) member and the CCP’s tsar for legal and political-security affairs prior to his retirement, as well as the fall from power of numerous high-ranking leaders, especially a number of ministers in the Ministry of Public Security. Together with a huge cleansing of CCP secretaries and PLA generals, Xi Jinping thus kicked off his “new era.”

⁵ “不忘初心,” was a theme in the CCP’s 2019 ideological education campaign. See the official webpage “‘不忘初心, 牢记使命’主题教育官方网站”, <http://chuxin.people.cn>, especially “习近平关于‘不忘初心、牢记使命’重要论述,” <http://chuxin.people.cn/GB/428150/>

⁶ There are numerous elaborations on Xi’s “刀刃向内, 自我革命” slogan. See a recent official example in: 刘靖北, “刀刃向内, 把党的伟大自我革命进行到底,” 人民网, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0702/c40531-32146769.html>

⁷ This is a reference to Li Chuncheng (李春城), then No. 3 leader of Sichuan province. See “中纪委: 李春城涉嫌严重违纪正接受组织调查,” http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-12/06/c_113923447.htm

During the first five years of Xi's rule since November 2012, incomplete data show that up to June 2017 more than two million CCP cadres were disciplined by the party due to corruption, including 280-plus high-ranking leaders and more than 8,600 bureau-level cadres.⁸ Among the total of 205 full members of the 18th Central Committee, 25 were purged; if we also count the two who were purged after 2017, they together account for 13 percent of the CCP 18th Central Committee. At the same time, more than 20 (the exact number is not available as some cases have not been announced) alternative members of the 18th Central Committee, among a total of 171, were also purged, accounting for at least 14 percent.⁹ In addition, some other of such high-ranking leaders were marginalized and their political futures brought to an end without formal punishment.

Aside from Zhou Yongkang, other prominent victims of Xi's anti-corruption campaign include: Sun Zhengcai (孙政才), the youngest member of the 18th Politburo; Ling Jihua (令计划), the most powerful right-hand leader of former party chief Hu Jintao; Guo Boxiong (郭伯雄) and Xu Caihou (徐才厚), both members of the 17th Politburo and vice chairmen of the 17th Central Military Commission (CMC); and almost all other members of the 17th CMC (with the exception of its chairman, Hu Jintao), including PLA chief of the general staff Fang Fenghui (房峰辉) and PLA director of the general political department Zhang Yang (张阳).¹⁰

In the second five years of Xi Jinping's rule, the anti-corruption campaign basically maintained its momentum, as a similar number of about more than two million cadres were purged, bringing the total number of cadres investigated for corruption during the past ten years (up to April 2022) to 4.79 million and bringing the total number of party members who were punished in various ways to 11.344 million person-times.¹¹ Even though, thus far, in the recent five years no top-ranking leaders, such as Politburo members, have been targets, the scale of the purges at the lower levels of the party-state hierarchy has been widespread. In the public-security sector, for

⁸ 新华社, “压倒性态势是如何形成的: 党的十八大以来反腐倡廉工作综述,” http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-10/05/c_1121764418.htm, October 5, 2017; accessed July 28, 2022.

⁹ The author's database.

¹⁰ See respective official announcements of these cases in the following: Sun Zhengcai: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-07/24/c_1121372319.htm; Ling Jihua: <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/1223/c70731-26256563.html>; Guo Boxiong: <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/mil/2015/07-30/7438712.shtml>; Xu Caihou: <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0630/c1001-25220218.html>; Fang Fenghui: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-10/16/c_1123567979.htm; and Zhang Yang: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-10/16/c_1123567978.htm

¹¹ See “党在革命性锻造中更加坚强有力,” <http://www.scio.gov.cn/m/34473/34474/Document/1726440/1726440.htm>, July 1, 2022; accessed July 28, 2022.

example, purges have continued wave after wave, with the latest round, as of this essay in writing, came as the replacement of provincial-level police chiefs.¹²

Based on the fierce discipline of CCP cadres, during the past ten years Xi has basically remade the norms of elite politics. In fact, corruption per se might be regarded as a fundamental norm of CCP politics, at least since Deng Xiaoping's 1992 southern tour that revitalized marketization and thus encouraged cadres at all levels, whether legitimately or illegitimately, to promote the growth of wealth. It is believed that at that time the seeds of corruption were planted and started to grow. Jiang Zemin's famous citation of an old Chinese saying, though in a different context, was thus welcomed by cadres: "keep silent while making a great fortune" (闷声大发财). Public power has become market capital, which is the most rewarding. When Xi Jinping repeatedly warns CCP cadres not to dream of becoming public officials and simultaneously to make their fortunes ("不要既想当官又想发财"), he is in fact destroying the dreams of millions of his fellow party elite.

A major issue that emerges from an observation of elite politics in Xi's China is the following: How was it possible, and even relatively easy, for Xi, who actually rose to power from a weak power base, to successfully struggle against so many powerful CCP leaders? I would argue that Xi has so done because he fully takes advantage of the fundamental rules of the CCP regime. One of such advantages is, according to the CCP's rudimentary rules, the entire party must remain consistent with the party center and the party's No. 1 leader. Even Deng Xiaoping, a prominent reformer of the CCP, also emphasizes that the concentration of power is a fundamental political advantage of the CCP regime, and that only the establishment of the No. 1 leader's "core" position within the party center can assure this advantage.¹³ Xi Jinping is simply following Deng Xiaoping in this regard, and as such, he has fully utilized this institutional advantage to unfold his "new era."

In a similar vein, Xi also follows Deng Xiaoping (and, of course, Mao Zedong) in fully utilizing the No.1 leader's exclusive command over the coercive power of the party/state to support his paramount power and authority. This basic feature of the CCP regime was compromised during the Hu Jintao era, when Jiang Zemin initially remained on as CMC chairman to constrain Hu's power and, during Hu's second term, Jiang's protégé Zhou Yongkang controlled the so-called *zhengfa* (political-legal, 政法) system. The beginning of Xi's regime, as noted, was marked by the party chief reassuming the power over the coercive machine, including the so-called gun barrel (枪杆子, referring to the military) and the handle of the knife (刀把子, referring mainly to the police). In so doing, Xi was actually not violating the rules of CCP politics but simply returning to regime norms.

¹² See, for instance, Guoguang Wu, "Continuous Purges: Xi's Control of the Public Security Apparatus and the Changing Dynamics of CCP Elite Politics," *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 66 (December 2020), <https://www.prcleader.org/wu>

¹³ For a recent authoritative elaboration of such ideas, including those of Deng, see, for example, 李鸿忠, "坚决维护党的核心和党中央权威," 人民网, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1125/c64094-32291365.html>

The authoritarian nature of CCP politics, in a similar vein, also enables Xi as party chief to put his large-scale elite circulation policies into practice. As a non-democratic regime, the CCP conducts elite circulations from top-down rather than bottom-up, and all cadres' career relies on their bosses' favor, ultimately on party chief Xi's willingness on personnel issues. Such power concentration and elite circulation are thus mutually enforcing each other to provide Xi with the status, power, and institutional advantages to successfully play the game over power.

Different dreams on the wane: From a neo-authoritarian oligarchy to a neo-totalitarian tyranny

Xi's huge successes in concentrating power and in remaking elite politics during his first five-year term (2012–17) can be summed up by the following moves: 1) purging numerous powerful enemies within the leadership, including a potential successor whom his predecessors had put in place to succeed Xi; 2) promoting numerous followers among CCP cadres to key positions, especially in the coercive sectors; 3) taking over a majority of the seats on the 19th Politburo, thereby bringing an end to the hidden norm, from Mao to Hu Jintao, of achieving a factional balance in the organization of the Politburo; 4) avoiding the appointment of any younger members to the Politburo in the leadership transition and thus intentionally avoiding the selection of any successors to Xi and not putting in place any plans for a post-Xi leadership transition; 5) removing term limits for PRC president, a position held concurrently by CCP general secretary since 1992, through passage of the 13th amendment to the state constitution and thus paving the way for Xi's third, and possibly more, terms in power; 6) restructuring decision-making at the highest levels of power and therefore allowing Xi to be in charge of most commissions; and 7) creating a high tide in Xi's personality cult by the official propaganda organs and returning to Cultural Revolution–style leadership worship in every public speech by cadres and in all CCP publications.

Ironically, these successes posed a series of fundamental dilemmas to Xi as leader, to CCP elites as the political base of the regime, and to the nation with the growth of the economy and its rise as a global power. All of those dilemmas, briefly analyzed below, have intensified Xi's confrontation with the CCP elites and have been accelerated up the regime's degeneration from a neo-authoritarian oligarchy to a neo-totalitarian tyranny.

The dilemmas troubling Xi can be understood at two levels. In terms of elite politics, political purges can easily become Xi's "red slippers," as those in a Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale about a young girl who puts on a pair of red slippers that will not allow her to stop dancing. Here the logic is: the more comrades you have purged, the more enemies you have created, and the less security you will feel in power, thus prompting you to engage in more purges. Political developments during Xi's recent five years have clearly revealed such a trend, primarily demonstrated by Xi's ongoing efforts to control the public-security apparatus by continuing purges and by changing the targets of his purges to his former political allies during his first term, including Wang Qishan (王岐山), his closest and most important partner in the anti-corruption campaign. This is why, in a previous analysis, I conclude that continuous purges have already become part of the basic dynamics of CCP elite politics, with Xi's neo-totalitarian

program not only repressing societal actors but also CCP elite politics becoming increasingly dominated by intra-regime repression with coercive measures.¹⁴

In the same way, a concentration of power is by nature self-defeating. As we know, the governance capacity of the CCP regime lies in its strength to monopolize public power. But a monopoly of power can produce serious and even fundamental challenges to governance, especially governance of a society with a market economy, some social plurality, and global engagement.¹⁵ Xi has now exacerbated this dilemma by involving the regime elites: the more power becomes concentrated in Xi's hands, the more responsibilities Xi must place on the shoulders of his less-responsible subordinates, leading to negative effects on the entire system. As a result, an ironic situation has emerged during Xi's second term: measures to concentrate power, whose initial aim was to improve government efficiency, have led to the opposite situation whereby the inability of the regime to govern becomes increasingly apparent. Under such circumstances, a new Chinese-language term has been devised to describe the prevailing mood among both cadres and ordinary people. This is *tangping* (躺平), literally "lying flat," or simply bowing out from the rat race.¹⁶

CCP elites are highly reluctant to accept that, due to Xi's program to remake elite politics, trends are leading in the direction of the neo-authoritarian oligarchy turning into a neo-totalitarian tyranny. Even when so many CCP elites were deprived of both their wealth and power, and in some cases even their personal freedoms, the remaining elites never expected that they would face a similar situation. Even when they were repeatedly warned about mixing wealth and power, they clung fast to their hopes that the regime would protect their elite privileges, they ignored the warnings and chose instead a wait-and-see attitude. Their cynicism was supported by Xi's highly selective party discipline. In fact, for some junior cadres, Xi's anti-corruption campaign has opened up a fast channel for vertical mobility, allowing his protégés to receive "helicopter" promotions to prestigious posts. Meanwhile, as long as they were trusted by Xi or his associates, cadres still clung to their hopes that one day they would become CCP billionaires.¹⁷

It is not easy, however, for high-ranking cadres whose careers were advanced during pre-Xi days to join the bandwagon by becoming Xi loyalists. Xi might utilize them to do his dirty work, but they might just as well be purged or sidelined after they are no longer useful. Fu Zhenghua (傅政

¹⁴ See above, Note 12.

¹⁵ Guoguang Wu, "From the CCP Dilemma to the Xi Jinping Dilemma: The Chinese Regime's Capacity for Governance," *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 63 (March 2020), <https://www.prcleader.org/guoguang-wu>

¹⁶ For an interesting explanatory article in *China Daily*, see <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202106/13/WS60c54a83a31024ad0bac6830.htm>

¹⁷ For example, the Hong Kong-based English newspaper, *South China Morning Post*, reported that Li Zhanshu (栗战书), Xi's right-hand man and currently China's No. 3 leader, together with his family, were included in a huge corruption case, but the article was withdrawn under political pressure from Beijing. See <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/good-for-alibaba-scmp-quashes-column-on-xi-linked-tycoon>

华) and Sun Lijun (孙力军), both high-ranking cadres in the Ministry of Public Security, are typical victims of such purges,¹⁸ while Chen Quanguo (陈全国), a Politburo member who implemented the draconian crackdown in Xinjiang, and Wang Zhimin (王志民), the CCP Hong Kong official who implemented Xi's hardline state security legislation that led to political turbulence are victims of sidelining, as they both were demoted after they carried out local crackdowns.¹⁹

During Xi's second term anti-Xi discontent gathered momentum among many CCP elites. After Xi had clearly indicated his intention to remain in power beyond two terms, such discontent became desperate. The CCP elites inevitably had to forgo their illusions that Xi would be gone by 2022–2023 and that the oligarchic structure of the regime would return. More recently, a much-delayed resistance, resonant with the rise of social desperation against Xi's domestic and foreign policies, has arisen as a last resort to block Xi's third term.²⁰

The most prominent dilemma facing any elite resistance, however, lies in the total dependence of the elite on the regime in every respect – politically, economically, financially, socially, culturally, etc. Within the regime, the elite are now facing the “inward blade” of the knife with the handle in Xi's hands; without the regime, they are next to nothing. But with the accumulation of family fortunes, some may choose to “run” – this too is a newly created Chinese term that adopts Chinese pinyin pronunciation of the English term “run,” thus is written with the Chinese character 润. This has given rise to the new term, “run-nology” (润学), referring to “studies” on how to run away from China. But, it is now exceedingly difficult for CCP cadres to go overseas, primarily because Xi has tightened control over the outflow of both people and money. As the opportunities for “exit” wane, according to the now-classic study by Albert Hirschman, the “voice” of protests correspondingly rises.²¹ This also partially explains the recent long-delayed rise of elite resistance.

Chinese people as a whole also face these dilemmas, but to a far lesser degree than the CCP elite. They similarly benefitted from the Dengist economic development and open-door policies, but they suffered from the consequences of the accompanying rampant corruption, growing inequalities, and omnipresent injustices. During his first term, Xi's powerful anti-corruption campaign was generally welcomed by ordinary Chinese citizens, who widely celebrated the fall of the powerful, extravagant, and arrogant elites, despite the fact that punishment was politically

¹⁸ See Note 12.

¹⁹ For Chen, see relevant reports, such as those in the following http://www.news.cn/politics/2021-12/25/c_1128200313.htm; <https://www.163.com/dy/article/H9U37JO4053469LG.html> For Wang, see <https://baike.baidu.com/item/王志民/911321>

²⁰ For the recent rise of elite resistance, see, for example, Guoguang Wu, “Politics and Norms in Leadership Reorganization toward the 20th Party Congress: Preliminary Observations,” *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 71 (March 2022), <https://www.prleader.org/wu-2>

²¹ Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

selective and not subject to any legal procedures. For many reasons, including their daily life experiences and traditional cultural values, Chinese residents are inclined to support the dictator in his war against the bureaucrats. This is why Mao is still popular in China today and why his disastrous Cultural Revolution is remembered favorably by some. When Xi's authority reaches new heights whereby the goals of his power and authority are to victimize ordinary people and to deprive them of their already limited rights – as revealed by Xi's containment of the Covid-19 pandemic and its disastrous economic aftermath – the winds may change abruptly and Xi's legitimacy to fight elite resistance may be quickly exhausted.²²

Conclusion

A prominent political feature of the Xi Jinping era has been the emergence of tensions and confrontations between Xi, the dominant leader, and the elites of his own regime. This has occurred because of two fundamental institutional characteristics of the CCP regime. First, as Leninist regimes are ruled by man, not laws, any new leader overwhelmingly must rely on a purge of his rivals and promotion of loyalists within the regime to consolidate power and to implement his programs. Second, the post-Mao transformation of the CCP has a built-in self-contradiction, which exists primarily between the partially marketized economy and the CCP's monopoly over political power. Xi and his predecessors, as well as those elites who grew up under his predecessors, have different emphases in order to manage this self-contradiction: From Deng Xiaoping through Jiang Zemin and to Hu Jintao, the CCP leaderships prior to Xi chose to promote market capitalism to maintain the CCP dictatorship. But Xi sees huge pitfalls in market capitalism for his regime and, accordingly, he is determined to struggle against these pitfalls to preserve the CCP dictatorship.

With Xi's coming to office, the bankruptcy of the consensus among the post-Tiananmen CCP leaderships became apparent. A significant part of the consensus, as CCP practice prior to Xi has well demonstrated, was to allow elite rent-seeking in pursuit of individual interests that resonated with regime interests. This can be described with the metaphor about the same bed (i.e., the CCP regime), but different dreams (i.e., the private goals of those who are sleeping in the bed). In proposing the "China dream" as a unified goal of the regime, Xi has been engaged in a struggle to remake CCP elite politics by destroying the dreams of cadres to attain personal wealth through public power but by maintaining what Xi perceives to be the CCP's "founding mission" that is, to keep their "red bed" unshaken by no one from within or without. To this author, such a struggle is a central theme of Chinese political development during the past ten years under Xi Jinping.

In the space above, we sketch how this struggle has been unfolded to shape the major trends in Chinese elite politics during the past ten years and how it has remade the framework of CCP leadership politics from the previous oligarchy to Xi's one-man dictatorship. We argue that Xi's successes in concentrating power in his own hands can better be understood as an institutional phenomenon in CCP politics rather than as something that can be exclusively attributed to Xi's

²² Guoguang Wu, "A Setback or Boost for Xi Jinping's Concentration of Power? Domination versus Resistance within the CCP Elite," *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 58 (December 2018), <https://www.prclleader.org/bump-or-speed-up>

wisdom and/or his ability. Xi is highly skillful in playing the authoritarian game of politics, but his mixed record of governance and foreign relations during the last ten years clearly demonstrates his shortcomings as a statesman. During his first five years, Xi successfully mobilized the needed institutional resources that the regime provided to him to unfold huge purges of cadres and to concentrate power in his own hands. These efforts met with little elite resistance. During his second term, however, the enhancement of Xi's power and personal authority limited the overall returns that CCP elites could reap from their political power, thus undermining the regime's critical interests in economic growth and global connections. Elite resistance thus arose concurrently with the widespread social discontent in China against Xi's poor governance record.

Will the last resort of elite resistance be able to block Xi's ambition to obtain a third term as party chief at the 20th Party Congress and even to remain in power beyond 2027? Will the dynamics of CCP elite politics revert back to an oligarchic track by snuffing out the neo-Maoist trends created by Xi? Political elements aside, the institutional elements highlighted in this essay provide a pessimistic answer to these questions. As long as the fundamental consensus between Xi and his intra-party enemies to maintain the CCP's monopoly of public power is not broken, the regime will continue to provide the dictator with the institutional advantages to actualize his goals, rather than those of his subordinates. There may be exceptions and surprises, of course, as there are in politics in general and in closed or partially closed authoritarian politics in particular. In the institutional analysis of elite politics in this essay, the "dreams" remain dubious, but the "bed" remains solid. Ultimately, Xi and his intra-CCP enemies share the same dream, that is, to maintain the CCP regime, from which they all can benefit. In other words, the resistance is inevitably weak, fragile, and possibly unfounded, as long as the powerful CCP cadres are reluctant to challenge the entire regime, upon which they all depend.

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