

The Chinese National Security State Emerges from the Shadows to Center Stage

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Xi Jinping has been unrelenting in his efforts to turn China into a national security state. New institutional, doctrinal, and regulatory mechanisms have been established along with a substantial beefing up of internal and external coercive capabilities. No single seminal shock triggered this security turn, but Xi regarded externally focused realpolitik perspectives, upon which the country's national security posture have traditionally been, based as partial and too rosy. His top security concerns revolved around domestic stability and Party resilience. To build a national security state under his direct control, Xi pursued an indirect approach employing unconventional methods, such as a no-holds-barred discipline-enforcement campaign, consisting of a sweeping anti-corruption crackdown and a political discipline crusade. Running parallel was a far-reaching reform of the civilian national security and military apparatuses. Chinese authorities argue that this building of a national security fortress is prescient in the face of the acute challenges presented by COVID-19, unrest in Hong Kong, and deteriorating U.S.-China relations.

The Chinese national security state emerged from its lair during this past summer to ensnare Hong Kong. The draconian powers of the National Security Law that Beijing imposed and the creation of an untouchable enforcement mechanism has dealt a fatal blow to the "One Country, Two Systems" arrangement that Hong Kong had enjoyed since returning to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Trenchant responses from the international community have been to no avail as Beijing has made clear that its pursuit of national security will be carried out whatever the costs. In addition to Hong Kong, this uncompromising stance on national security is paramount in China's intensifying standoff with the U.S. and in other pressing issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

A signature feature of Xi Jinping's rule has been his unrelenting efforts to turn China into a national security fortress. New institutional, doctrinal, and regulatory mechanisms have been established along with a substantial beefing up of internal and external coercive capabilities. This has allowed for the pursuit of more assertive domestic and external security postures, such as the building of fortified artificial islands in the South China Sea and the erection of an imposing public security and surveillance apparatus within the country, and especially in outlying regions such as Xinjiang.

This essay addresses a number of key issues to understand the nature of the Chinese national security state and its domestic and international implications. Why did China take this national security turn under Xi Jinping? What were the driving factors responsible for such a drastic shift in the country's strategic direction? How has the Xi regime carried out the building of an expansive national security edifice? How capable is the Chinese national security state and how has it responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and other major security challenges?

What is a National Security State and How Does it Apply to China?

The notion of a national security state has traditionally been associated with the garrison state, a concept coined in the 1930s by Harold Lasswell who argued that military technological advances would lead to military specialists eventually taking over control of the state.¹ Not surprisingly, the national security state has often been viewed in sinister terms, especially as a threat to democratic rule.² While Hong Kong is the present epicenter of attention for these concerns, the U.S. has also borne intense scrutiny for the excessive employment of its national security capabilities, such as in the global war against terrorism during the 2000s and more recently in the handling of civil urban protests by the Trump administration.

In the case of present-day China, a small but growing number of studies have labeled the country as a security state but without offering any explicit definitions beyond identifying the expansion, influence, and intensifying use of the security apparatus and the “securitization” of the state.³ Drawing from International Relations literature on defensive and offensive realism, national security states can be defined along a spectrum with one end being defensively oriented states and the other end being offensively minded states. The ideal-type defensive national security state engages in restrained positive-sum balancing behavior in which the main goal is to maintain the status quo and not to maximize power. These defensive states build their security through internal resource mobilization rather than outward expansion and alliance building and they focus mainly on domestic security and border defense, with only limited and temporary efforts at power projection. The ideal-type offensive national security state engages in zero-sum behavior that is coercive and relies heavily on pre-emptive or punitive use of military force beyond the state’s immediate borders. It is also highly repressive internally and seeks to mobilize its economy and society to support its external policies. In reality, states combine both defensive and offensive attributes.

China under Xi Jinping is seeking to establish itself as a leading power on the international stage, and the development of a more capable and assertive national security state is a critical component in this grand endeavor. This has meant that the country’s national security posture is in transition from being primarily defensively minded to combining both defensive and offensive elements. Xi talks about pursuing a “new type of international relations with win-win co-operation at its core,” forging a “community of destiny for humanity” that emphasizes peace, shared security, and common prosperity, and taking the “road of peaceful development.” But this open hand is enclosed in an iron glove as Xi has also maintained that China “absolutely cannot abandon our legitimate rights and interests, nor can we sacrifice national core interests” in offering this shared approach to peace and development.⁴ Moreover, given the prominent role of the Chinese Communist Party in overseeing national security affairs, it may be more accurate to call what Xi is building a national security Party-state.

The National Security Turn Under Xi Jinping

Although China at the beginning of the 2010s was authoritarian and pro-statist, it nevertheless was firmly committed to economic development as its top priority. Economic agencies and economic officials were the dominant political and bureaucratic constituencies in the policy process. Moreover, the previous several decades of reform and opening had led to the emergence

of an increasingly tolerant and robust civil society, with checks and balances that helped to set limits on the power of the Party-state and that allowed for limited debate over policy choices, although these parameters often waxed and waned.

When Xi took office in late 2012, he stealthily moved to undertake a far-reaching adjustment of the country's national security posture with little public or even internal debate. There were few signs that the new administration was even contemplating undertaking a profound shift toward national security, despite the beginning of major changes. The first official indication that the Party was beginning to put in place the key components of a new national security order was a brief discussion of national security matters in the communiqué of the Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Congress in November 2013. This was followed in April 2014 by the public unveiling of the Central National Security Commission (CNSC) and the subsequent passing of stringent national security-related regulations, laws, and strategies.

There was no single seminal shock that triggered this national security turn. For China's realist-minded security policy makers at the helm in the early 2010s, the country's national security situation was complicated but manageable and well-understood. In his swansong address at the Eighteenth Party Congress in November 2012, Hu Jintao said that "the world today is undergoing profound and complex changes," but the overall "balance of international forces is developing in a direction favorable for the maintenance of world peace, creating more favorable conditions for overall stability in the international environment."⁵

For Xi, however, these traditional realpolitik perspectives painted only a partial and far-too-rosy picture of China's actual security environment. He brought to office a very different set of assumptions and viewpoints as to what constituted the most worrying sources of dangers to the Party and the country and how they should be addressed. As a long-time provincial apparatchik, Xi's worldview was dominated by domestic and Party concerns. Analysts who have examined Xi's track record while running Fujian and Zhejiang provinces in eastern China in the 1990s and 2000s have found a "dogged supporter of party orthodoxy."⁶ Even as Xi was taking the reins of power, he remained focused on the perils confronting the Communist Party. In particular, he spent considerable time studying the lessons emanating from the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁷ Shortly after becoming paramount leader, in a speech asking why the Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party had collapsed, Xi answered that "their ideals and beliefs had been shaken." Xi added that this was "a profound lesson for us. To dismiss the history of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party, to dismiss Lenin and Stalin, and to dismiss everything else is to engage in historic nihilism."⁸

Xi was determined that the Chinese Communist Party should avoid the same fate, even though China in the 2010s bore little resemblance to the decrepit Soviet regime of the 1980s. Xi's answer was a hand-in-glove strategy of hard-hitting ideological purification and the building up of a repressive national security state. This need to prepare for danger in times of peace and to be ready for sudden incidents became important strands in the weaving of a tapestry that would eventually become known as the Overall National Security Outlook (ONSC). Unveiled in April 2014, the ONSC has become the overarching conceptual framework for Xi's national security state. The country's first-ever national security strategy, which was issued in 2015, is derived

largely from the ONSC.⁹ A central argument of the ONSC is that “China now faces the most complicated internal and external factors in [its] history.”¹⁰

At first glance, this statement would appear to be overly alarmist as China had endured existential nuclear threats from the U.S. in the 1950s and border clashes with the Soviet Union in the late 1960s that nearly escalated into a full-scale war. But the point being made by the ONSC is that the dangers imperiling China in the twenty-first century are not the gravest that it has ever faced but the most complex. Based on Xi’s reconceptualization of national security, the most dangerous threats are not external but internal, not traditional but non-traditional, not geo-strategic but political, and not in the here and now but emerging. From this vantage point, the world is a far darker and more menacing place, thus justifying the establishment of a strong national security state. So the concrete security environment that China faced in the early 2010s had not radically deteriorated, but the way its new leaders perceived the situation had been significantly altered.

On the issue of core national interests, the balance between development, security, and sovereignty has also been revised under Xi’s tenure. From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao, development was by far the most important national priority, but Xi has elevated security to the same level, if not higher. “We not only emphasize development issues but also security issues,” Xi said at a CNSC meeting in April 2014.¹¹ Moreover, Xi said that national security and development are deeply intertwined with each other. “Security and development are two sides of the same issue, two wheels in the same driving mechanism. Security guarantees development, and development is the goal of security.”¹² What this means is that China needs to pursue a more pro-active and assertive approach in shaping and protecting its security environment to promote development rather than its previously more reactive and low-key posture.

What Motivated the Building of the National Security State?

The motivating factors behind the building of the contemporary Chinese national security state can be divided between threats and opportunities. The key challenges and opportunities have been distilled into a pithy formulation known as the “Three Major Dangers” (三大趨勢) and the “Three Unprecedenteds” (三个前所未有的).¹³ The three dangers are: 1) the threats from invasion, subversion, and splittism; 2) the undermining of reform, development, and stability; and 3) the interruption of China’s socialist system. These three categories correspond to the country’s three official core national interests of sovereignty, development, and security.

This first category of “invasion, subversion, and splittism” primarily concerns the external and internal dangers to the country’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. The external dangers are over maritime sovereignty disputes in the South and East China Seas. Territorial integrity is related to ensuring that Taiwan remains a part of China. Splittism and subversion are tied to the ethnic unrest that China faces in its autonomous regions in the far west, namely Tibet and Xinjiang. There have been major upheavals in these two regions during the past decade and Uyghur separatists have engaged in terrorist attacks in Xinjiang and other parts of China and against Chinese targets overseas. Beginning in 2014, Xi oversaw a significant ramping up of efforts to build a massive coercive apparatus in Xinjiang, which has led to the detention of

hundreds of thousands of local Uighur residents and the establishment of a pervasive and highly intrusive surveillance state.

The second category of dangers refers to the undermining of reforms, economic development, and stability. Mitigating social instability is a first-order priority for the Chinese authorities in the face of widening social inequality, pervasive corruption, deep-seated structural unemployment, and numerous other social problems. But the identification that the “undermining of reforms” poses a national security danger is unusual as this means that opposition to Xi’s reform agenda can be construed as a national security threat. There have been occasional reports in the official Chinese media indicating that the reforms have run into difficulties. A widely published commentary in Chinese state media in August 2015 states that the “scale of resistance” against Xi’s reforms “is beyond what could have been imagined.”¹⁴

The third and most important cluster of dangers revolves around the Communist Party’s hold on power. This represents the greatest concern for the CCP leadership, which it views as coming from numerous domestic and external quarters. This includes a deeply held view among CCP leaders that the West is seeking regime change in China. This has only been reinforced in recent years by the spectacle of the “color revolutions in Europe and the “Arab Spring” political upheavals that swept the Middle East. Closer to home, CCP authorities were unnerved by the student-led political unrest in Hong Kong, known as “Occupy Central” in 2014 and the subsequent inability of the Hong Kong government to effectively crack down on these protestors.

Perhaps the biggest and most immediate impetus behind Xi’s national security turn was the response to an apparent attempt to thwart his rise to power by a cabal of senior figures in the Hu Jintao regime, in which both the civilian and military components of the national security apparatus were deeply implicated. Xi and other senior members of his administration have spoken about attempted power grabs, splittist activities, and political conspiracies by senior leaders in the Hu regime. In a speech at the Sixth Plenum of the Eighteenth CCP Central Committee in October 2016, Xi said five senior civilian and military leaders had all conspired in “political activities”: Zhou Yongkang, a Politburo Standing Committee member and head of the domestic security apparatus; Bo Xilai, Party secretary of Chongqing and Politburo member; Ling Jihua, head of the CCP General Office; and Generals Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, who were both vice chairmen of the Central Military Commission (CMC).

Although little is known about the exact nature of this attempted seizure of power, Xi has been clear in his public remarks that he regards such actions as very serious threats. Upon taking office, Xi acted swiftly to arrest his foes, regardless of their rank and initially under the guise of an anti-corruption campaign, and he began a sweeping reorganization of the national security apparatus to centralize authority and oversight under his direct personal control. This shows that the national security turn was also strongly driven by Xi’s personal motivations to secure his hold on power.

In addition to the top-level leadership intrigues, the Xi administration has also regarded subversion within the ranks of the Chinese political and social systems as another serious national security threat. The CCP General Office issued a communiqué in April 2013 “On the Current State of the Ideological Sphere,” also known as Document No. 9, that warns of seven

perils subverting the Party's grip on power. They include Western constitutional democracy, the promotion of universal values of human rights, Western notions of media independence, civil society, neo-liberalism, and nihilist views of history.¹⁵ These liberal ideas and reforms had been allowed to take root during the Jiang and Hu regimes, but the Xi administration launched major crackdowns on political, academic, legal, and media freedoms and against non-governmental organizations promoting civil society and human rights.

At the same time as the Xi regime was taking drastic defensive steps to tackle what it perceived as a volatile threat environment, it also saw a golden opportunity for China to step forward and gain recognition as a leading global power. Upon taking office, a key tenet of Xi's grand strategic vision or his China Dream was that after decades of arduous economic catching up, China was now sufficiently prosperous and powerful to assume a leading role in world affairs. This notion that the time has finally come for China's arrival at the center of the global stage after a hiatus of several centuries, has become a powerful source of a more assertive national identity.

From a national security perspective, China enjoys a number of strategic advantages to become a world leader, what Xi refers to as the "Three Unprecedents."¹⁶ The first "unprecedented" is that China is approaching the center of the world stage in an unprecedented fashion. In other words, China's rapid economic development has caused a disruption to the global balance of power. The second "unprecedented" signifies that China is approaching its goal of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in an unprecedented manner. This success in China's nation-building has been due to the central role of the Communist Party. The third "unprecedented" states that China now has unprecedented capabilities and confidence to achieve its objectives of becoming a great power. This means that a confident, capable, and socialist-led China should take advantage of the strategic opening made possible by its remarkable economic development to claim a leading spot in the international system.

But Chinese leaders point out that this window of opportunity for breaking through to the top will not be open for long and China's ability to succeed faces fierce opposition by competitors led by the United States. Consequently, China will need to adopt a more assertive national security posture to meet these challenges. Admiral Sun Jianguo, a vice chairman of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff, has argued that China will need to "struggle" (斗争) to ensure that its vital interests are met: "It is impossible to have the United States respect our core interests. Without struggle, it is impossible to achieve cooperation and mutual benefit on a foundation of equality. And without struggle, it will be impossible to have today's favorable situation."¹⁷ The implications for the building of the Chinese national security state in this era of strategic opportunity is that it will need to be more offensively oriented.

The Means for Forging the National Security State

Although Xi is keenly motivated to forge a national security state under his direct control, having the tools and means to accomplish this objective is a different matter. As a relative newcomer to the national political stage and with a thin background in national security affairs, Xi faced formidable obstacles. Past leaders had tried and failed in similar enterprises because of deeply entrenched political and bureaucratic interests.

Upon taking office, Xi quickly went on the offensive to go after his political opponents and began to arrest the spiraling decline of the Party and its hold on power. But Xi was careful not to directly confront vested political and bureaucratic interests head-on, so he pursued a more indirect approach by employing unconventional methods and targeting vulnerable and weak points.

A no-holds-barred discipline-enforcement campaign was the centerpiece of Xi's arsenal that consisted of several elements, of which two are especially important.¹⁸ The most well-known is a sweeping anti-corruption crackdown that focused on bribery, embezzlement, and many other forms of using public office for private gain. A second key component is a political discipline campaign that focused in particular on investigating senior Party officials for violations of political discipline, such as conducting political activities not authorized by Party organizations. In addition, there were other initiatives undertaken to support this discipline-enforcement clampdown, such as a vigorous ideological rectification program that enforced a rigorous austerity regime on the spending activities of public officials.

Running parallel to the discipline-enforcement campaign was a carefully crafted two-part plan put forward by Xi to comprehensively remake the national security system. The first stage was a revamp of the civilian national security apparatus, which would be followed in a second phase by a sweeping reform of the military high command. The civilian security apparatus that Xi inherited "does not meet the requirements of safeguarding national security," which means there is an urgent need "to build a strong and powerful platform" that will allow for a unified approach to carry out national security work.¹⁹ The elements of this revamped system include: 1) a new centralized command structure; 2) a new theoretical and strategic approach to thinking about national security that will greatly broaden and redefine what the key threats are and where they come from; and 3) a new national security regulatory regime providing new laws and rules of the road to govern issues such as privacy and access to information. Altogether, this revamped national security model would be more intrusive, more centralized, and more expansive than anything in China's past, including during the Maoist era.

The first step to realizing Xi's grand vision came at the Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Central Committee, which stated that "setting up a National Security Commission has become urgent now in order to strengthen centralized, unified leadership over national security work." The primary duties of the new National Security Commission are to "formulate and implement a national security strategy, push forward the construction of national security rule-of-law, formulate national security work principles and policies, and study and resolve major national security issues."²⁰

The plenum statement provided the broadest of outlines for the proposed new national security set-up that would rest on three legs: 1) the National Security Commission would be the powerful organizational anchor of the system; 2) a legal framework that would revolve around a new national security law; and 3) a doctrinal component that would provide a comprehensive threat assessment and identify the strategic and operational priorities for the new national security state to carry out its tasks.²¹

The CNSC (中央国家安全委员会) was approved in January 2014 and resides at the apex of the new national security edifice. Its authority, power, and reach stem largely from its leadership structure, with Xi as the chairman and the Premier Li Keqiang and initially the National People's Congress Chairman Li Zhanshu as deputy chairmen. The CNSC is a party organ that reports directly to the Politburo Standing Committee and is described as “the nerve center of the central authorities responsible for making decisions and coordination on national security affairs.”²²

Little is known about the activities of the CNSC, its internal organizational structure, and how it engages with the rest of the national security, Party, and state apparatuses.²³ After brief media coverage of the CNSC's first meeting in 2014, there was no more official reporting of its meetings and activities until four years later in April 2018 when the first meeting of the post-Nineteenth Party Congress CNSC took place. There has been coverage of national security-related meetings, such as a National Security Work Symposium in February 2017, but the cloak of secrecy around the commission has been extremely tight.²⁴ The CNSC appears to have met again in the spring of 2020, although there was no public report on the event.²⁵

At the April 2018 meeting of the CNSC, Xi provided a brief but tantalizing overview of the work of the commission during its first four years. He said that the CNSC had: 1) built an “initial main framework”; 2) developed a theoretical system; 3) improved the “strategic national security system”; and 4) forged mechanisms for coordinating national security work. Xi also expressed satisfaction that the CNSC “has solved many tough problems that were long on the agenda but never resolved, and accomplished many things that were wanted but never got done.” Although no details were provided, Xi said that the end-result was that “national security has been comprehensively strengthened, and a firm hold has been kept on the initiative in the overall work of safeguarding national security.”²⁶ Xi added that attention should also be focused on dealing with long-term challenges, along with a need to improving social management capabilities.

The building of a sweeping legal framework is the second pillar of the national security system, which is anchored around the National Security Law (NSL) that was passed in July 2015. The main intention of the law is to provide “a legal format for the ONSC, a *People's Daily* commentary explained.²⁷ Consequently, the law resembles more of a “Communist Party ideology paper and a call to arms aimed at defending the party's grip on power” than a standard impartial legal text.²⁸ Previous national security legislation, such as the 1993 National Security Law, was far more narrowly focused on espionage matters.

The new NSL offers an expansive definition of national security as the “protection of the political regime, sovereignty, national unification, territorial integrity, people's welfare, and the ‘sustainable and healthy development’ of the economy and society.” More specifically, the NSL identifies an extensive array of domains, including political security, homeland security, military security, economic security, financial infrastructure security, energy security, food security, cultural security, scientific and technological security, information security, ethnic security, religious security, anti-terrorism security, societal security, environmental security, nuclear security, and security of outer space, the deep seas, and the polar regions. Along with other security-related legislation that has been passed during Xi's tenure, such as the National Intelligence Law (2017), Counter-Espionage Law (2014), Counter-Terrorism Law (2015), Cybersecurity Law (2016), and Foreign Non-Governmental Organizations Management Law

(2016), the Chinese national security state has unassailable legal authority to do anything it wants within its own borders and increasingly beyond.

How Capable is the Chinese National Security State?

The national security establishment that Xi inherited was a big and awkward behemoth. His goal has been to remake it into a strong, agile, cohesive, politically loyal, state-of-the-art twenty-first century institution. These are not traits commonly associated with China's coercive institutions. The entrenched conservatism, insularity, and compartmentalization of the sprawling national security base are formidable speed bumps to this reform effort.

A number of major improvements have taken place to help move the needle from being big to being strong. The starting point has been the top-down centralization of leadership authority. This has been principally focused on the establishment of the CNSC. But even though the overarching leadership authority of the CNSC is not in doubt, its ability to effectively oversee and operationally manage a sprawling, compartmentalized, decentralized, and bureaucratically fiercely competitive apparatus is. During the first few years of its establishment, Xi placed in key CNSC positions those who had little national security expertise. This move is unlikely to have helped in the building of effective coordination mechanisms with the military, security, and intelligence apparatuses, and suggests instead that the CNSC is a personalistic symbol of Xi's command of the national security state.

The imposition of tight Party control at all levels of the national security hierarchy and across all parts of the country has been another top priority. As Xi is the core of the Party, this Party control is also about ensuring his personal control. Xi has repeatedly stressed that "it is necessary to uphold the party's absolute leadership over national security work and implement stronger leadership and coordination."²⁹ The CNSC is responsible at the national level, while party committees are in charge at the lower levels. At the CNSC meeting in April 2018, a Party committee national security responsibility system was agreed upon that required Party committees at all levels to strengthen supervision and inspection of the performance of national security duties.³⁰

Related to the issue of political control is the expansion of the national security state's areas of responsibility to include anti-corruption and ideological discipline, especially within governing institutions. This likely means that the newly established national supervisory system and the existing discipline inspection system will be closely tied to the national security establishment and will be used to police the official establishment. Adding the supervisory and discipline inspection apparatus to the organizational line-up of the national security state expands its security capabilities in the ideological and disciplinary spheres but hardly increases its bulk. This is because these two institutions are tiny when compared to the principal public security and military organs.³¹

The main coercive pillars of the Chinese national security state are:

- **Public security system:** The public security apparatus is the domestic frontline of the national security state and it has a wide portfolio of responsibilities ranging from traffic

management to cybersecurity. Personnel strength ranges from 1.6 million to 2 million, which although large in absolute terms is small, compared to other countries, as a ratio to the national population.³²

- **State security/intelligence and counter-espionage system:** The Ministry of State Security (MSS) is the country's principal state security organization and is chiefly responsible for intelligence and counter-espionage.³³ The Ministry of Public Security and the PLA also have significant intelligence capabilities. The MSS is a relatively young organization, having only been created in 1983, and it has had to compete for resources, manpower, and power with its much older, larger, and more powerful public security sibling.
- **People's Liberation Army (PLA):** The PLA is the largest, most capable, and politically most influential component of the national security state, but it has also been the most removed from its civilian security and intelligence counterparts. The PLA has been primarily focused on meeting China's external security needs, although it has occasionally had to intervene domestically, such as during the Cultural Revolution and in 1989.
- **People's Armed Police (PAP):** The PAP has been the crucial link between domestic law enforcement and the military establishment ever since it was established in 1983. As part of Xi's far-reaching reforms of the defense establishment, the PAP was brought exclusively under the CMC in January 2018.³⁴ While this reorganization would appear to go against Xi's general goal of promoting military-civil integration and a more unified national security state, more important objectives are to significantly bolster the PAP's coercive capabilities, provide better war-fighting support to the PLA, and to enhance centralization of PAP control.
- **Political-legal system:** The Chinese Party-state has developed an extensive domestic security apparatus to address rising social unrest and stability maintenance (维稳) challenges. There is a core political-legal system that is made up of the public security, state security, judicial (courts and procuratorate), and Party political-legal apparatuses as well as a broader comprehensive public security management system that includes dozens of state organizations.³⁵

This expanding security apparatus is expensive, but published data suggest that the increasing economic burden is sustainable. Although officially declared national security spending has ramped up in absolute terms, it has held steady relative to overall national expenditures. Public security expenditures rose on average by 12.6 percent annually between 2010 and 2018. Annual defense expenditures during this same period rose on average by 9.6 percent. Although these are significant growth rates, they originate from low base levels in the 1990s and early 2000s. Surprisingly, the average annual increase for public security and defense expenditures fell modestly during the first six years of Xi's tenure. This suggests that Xi's support for the building of a robust national security state is more equivocal from a resource allocation perspective than are his policy positions. However, these official budget and expenditure figures lack

transparency and exclude major funding sources that are normally counted as expenditures in more open and accountable democratic regimes.

The national security state's political status and clout has also been steadily on the rise. Historically, national security and intelligence agencies have not been trusted by their Chinese political masters and consequently they have struggled for seats in the upper echelons of political and policy-making power. Their representation on key bodies such as the Politburo Standing Committee and the full Politburo have been limited. Under Xi's tenure, the national security community's presence on these bodies has grown significantly, both directly and indirectly.

In terms of operational effectiveness, there has been a gradual shift in the ingrained institutional culture of responding to security threats only when they occurred to pro-actively preventing them from taking place or nipping them in the bud as quickly as possible. The public security bureaucracy has been the chief proponent of this reactive mindset. Xi, however, has been pushing strongly for a more forward-leaning pre-emptive approach. At a risk mitigation workshop for provincial and ministerial-level cadres in January 2019, Xi talked about the need to be "highly vigilant against 'black swan' and guard against 'gray rhino' events."³⁶ This cultural change requires fundamental adjustments to operational practices, such as adopting information-based and intelligence-led approaches rather than "old-fashioned strategies based on 'gut suppositions' rather than analysis and intelligence" that "require diverting resources away from traditional priorities such as manpower and equipment."³⁷

The National Security State, COVID-19, U.S.-China Relations, and the Internal-External Security Nexus

The Xi regime has touted the ramping up of its national security apparatus as prescient in the face of the acute challenges that China has had to face simultaneously or near-simultaneously from COVID-19, mass protests in Hong Kong, and rapidly deteriorating U.S.-China relations. Indeed, one of the lessons that Beijing says it has learned is that even more investment should be made in fortifying the resilience, reach, and capabilities of the national security state.

In an assessment of how the Chinese national security system addressed the COVID-19 pandemic, Chen Wenqing, CNSC General Office deputy director and State Security minister, proclaimed that China's tough response to controlling the pandemic "fully shows General Secretary Xi Jinping's foresight and vision, and demonstrates the theoretical power and practical character of the overall national security concept."³⁸ Not surprisingly, there was no mention of the initial slow response during the first few weeks of the outbreak that highlighted the structural problems of the authoritarian top-down system in which bottom-up reporting is often neglected or is slow to percolate upwards. But Chen said that the ensuring "people's war" against the virus was a testament to several crucial advantages of the socialist system, which include the ability to concentrate resources and efforts quickly, the highly centralized and coordinated leadership system, and the country's deep mobilizational experience and expertise.

These qualities will be much needed for dealing with the deepening and drawn out across-the-board struggle with the U.S. that has intensified significantly with the pandemic. National security states thrive when threats are severe, direct, and imminent, and the accelerating adversarial competition between the U.S. and China will be used by the national security

apparatus to strengthen its already commanding position at the heart of the country's power structure.

The Xi regime views the challenge posed by the U.S. as increasingly comprehensive in nature, which means externally on the global stage and also within China's borders (including Hong Kong). This highlights a key difference between Xi's pursuit of national security from that of his predecessors. Before Xi's seismic shake-up of the Chinese national security order, a long-standing organizing principle was a strict partition between internal and external security. A primary reason for this compartmentalized approach was bureaucratic. Internal security was the chief responsibility of civilian institutions whereas external security was largely handled by the PLA. Driven by transnational and non-traditional security issues such as terrorism and crime, there were occasional efforts to bridge this divide, but they were limited and had a marginal impact on overcoming the deeply held conventions of the conservative change-averse security establishment.³⁹

Pursuing an integrated holistic approach that emphasizes the linkages between internal and external security is a central plank of Xi's thinking on national security. His logic is derived from the ideological lens with which he views national security. The downfall of authoritarian and Communist regimes around the world since the end of the 1980s through the color revolutions, Arab springs, and other labels is seen by Xi as being instigated by hostile foreign forces led by the U.S. In a speech to a military audience early into his tenure in July 2013, Xi said that "currently, struggles in the ideological field are extraordinarily fierce. The Western hostile forces are speeding up their 'Peaceful Evolution' and 'Color Revolution' in China. ... What they want to see most is that China also suffers from turmoil and troubles, so they intensify the political strategies of Westernizing and splitting up China overtly and covertly."⁴⁰

This theme of foreign elements behind Chinese internal security challenges has been a constant high priority throughout Xi's tenure. In January 2019, Zhao Kezhi, Public Security minister and head of the Central Political-Legal Commission, told participants at an annual public security conference that they must "stress the prevention and resistance of 'color revolutions' and firmly fight to protect China's political security." Zhao pointed to hostile foreign forces engaging in "all kinds of infiltration and subversive activities."⁴¹

Xi has highlighted three salient features of this blurring between internal and external security threats, which he has referred to as the "Three Prominents" (三个更加突出).⁴² The first trend is that traditional and non-traditional security threats are becoming increasingly intertwined. The second trend is that the transnational nature of security threats has become more prominent. The third trend is the broadening diversity of security threats that are borderless, especially cyber-related threats and financial and high-tech crimes.

An important consequence of this integrated national security perspective is that the geographical remit of Chinese security and intelligence agencies has broadened to allow them to increasingly conduct operations against individuals and organizations well beyond the country's borders.⁴³ Xi has called for a "global vision in national security work."⁴⁴ Targets have included Uyghurs who have fled China because of the security clampdown in Xinjiang, exiled dissidents and other

prominent critics of the Chinese Party-state, Hong Kong booksellers, Falun Gong members, and officials and business executives who have fled the Xi regime's anti-corruption crackdown.

The Prospects and Future Course of the Chinese National Security State: Personalistic vs. Institutional Dynamics

Xi Jinping has been the chief architect, builder, and enforcer of the national security state, which is an integral component in securing his long-term hold on power. Xi wields absolute authority as chairman of the CNSC, CMC, and Central Cyberspace Commission, which make up the triumvirate of the most important organizational components of the security system. Moreover, as Xi has been anointed as the core (核心) of the Party, he is regarded as the personification of the Party, and the ever-intensifying campaigns to enhance and safeguard the Party's control over the country are primarily a proxy to fortify Xi's grip on political power. The formulation that is put forward is the need to "safeguard the party's leadership, safeguard the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, and safeguard the authority of the party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core."⁴⁵ But as Susan Shirk points out, there is a paradox in Xi's efforts: "Despite his apparent grip on power, his insecurity is glaring."⁴⁶

This overwhelmingly personalistic leadership arrangement will very likely continue as long as Xi remains in power and is active. The consequences for the Chinese political system and for the country's national security state are profound. No one is as qualified to assess this impact as Deng Xiaoping, who sought to prevent a repeat of the deep political strife and chronic mismanagement of the Maoist era. When Deng undertook political reforms, he identified several of the most important root problems, which were the over-concentration of power, patriarchy, and life tenure.⁴⁷ Deng pointed out that "over-concentration of power is liable to give rise to arbitrary rule by individuals at the expense of collective leadership," while patriarchal ways "within the revolutionary ranks place individuals above the organization, which then becomes a tool in their hands" and has "a very damaging influence on the Party." On life-time tenure, Deng attributed this in part to feudal practices and demanded that "no leading cadre should hold any office indefinitely."

One gauge of the balance between personalistic and institutionalized control of the national security state is the composition of the top leader's inner circle for national security affairs. If political loyalists with little past experience in national security matters are appointed to many of the key slots, then personalistic rule is strong. But if national security professionals are placed in these posts, then this will indicate institutionalization is taking place. During Xi's first term, three of the seven members were political loyalists. This increased to five out of eight members of the national security inner circle during Xi's second term. This would indicate that Xi's personalistic rule has increased during his time in power.

Can the current national security state remain intact if Xi is no longer at the helm? Xi's departure would certainly leave a huge power vacuum, especially if he does not put in place a clear succession plan beforehand. His current deputies in charge at the CNSC and the CMC lack the political qualifications to take over from Xi in anything more than a short-term acting capacity. Consequently, there are serious doubts about the long-term sustainability of a post-Xi national security set-up.

About the Contributor

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