

Victor C. Shih. *Coalitions of the Weak: Elite Politics in China from Mao's Stratagem to the Rise of Xi*. Cambridge University Press. June 2022. 250 pp. ISBN 10-1009016512, 13-978-1009016513

What is the “coalition of the weak” strategy? What is the political logic behind this strategy? What are the trade-offs of this strategy in the Chinese context?

The basic foundation of the “coalition of the weak” strategy is the dearth of information provided by authoritarian politics. This dearth of information makes authoritarian politics much riskier for participants than democratic politics, all else being equal. In a one-party regime, everyone is supposed to be on the same side, even though implicitly the dictator knows that others are trying to usurp his power. Moreover, the dictator, as well as other actors, do not know the relative distribution of power among the elites of the regime. Only an outright conflict can provide that information, but for the dictator, finding this out when a power struggle has already begun will be too late. One way to overcome this information deficit is to promote officials who have shown their loyalty to the dictator in the past. The factional approach, however, runs into the problem that even a historically powerful lieutenant, if sufficiently powerful, can usurp the power of the dictator.

An alternative approach is for the dictator, to the extent possible, to only appoint people he knows are too weak to challenge his power. Weak officials are either junior officials with small political networks or more senior officials who have committed grave errors in the past and therefore are vulnerable to charges of wrongdoing. The dictator can appoint these officials knowing that the chances of their usurping his power are much smaller. In a way, this “weak coalition” strategy provides greater internal security to the dictator because senior officials in the regime cannot simply challenge the dictator’s power. The dictator does not need to worry about their loyalty. There is a trade-off, however. First, if the regime is filled with weak officials, they will only do the dictator’s bidding, regardless of the potential outcomes of the dictator’s favored policies. This can produce profoundly negative outcomes for the country and even for the regime. Also, they will have little incentive or ability to strengthen institutions in the regime, which does not bode well for the longevity of the regime.

Of the three dominant leaders – Mao, Deng, and Xi – who was the most successful in using this strategy to stay in power without causing excessive damage to the regime, if you consider their differing political circumstances?

In the book, I mainly focus on Mao, since he is the only leader who installed a true “coalition of the weak” after the fall of Lin Biao in 1971. After the Lin Biao incident, the Politburo was

composed of very junior Red Guards and mass representatives, members of the tainted Fourth Front Army, and a few surviving veterans with little formal power. For Mao, this was a highly successful strategy because, even as his health and cognition declined, he could rule China absolutely. No one could challenge his power.

During the Deng period, numerous veterans were rehabilitated and were put in charge of various domains. Within their respective domains, the veterans each pursued their own “coalitions of the weak” to minimize challenges to their authority and to maximize their post-retirement influence as they would face retirement in the late 1980s. Deng and Chen Yun did not promote strong leaders; instead they favored very inexperienced technocrats like Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Wen Jiabao. These officials never challenged the power of the veterans, but later they were unable to fight back against a daring and powerful princeling like Xi Jinping. This decentralized version of a weak coalition was also successful for the veterans and even the retired cadres because they were able to exert an important influence on policy making as “immortals” while weak technocrats served as nominal leaders. By all accounts, Deng influenced major policies until he lost consciousness in 1995 or so.

For Xi, it is unclear whether he is using a “coalition of the weak” strategy. Some Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) members, like Wang Huning, definitely fall into the “weak” category. However, some in Xi’s faction, such as Li Xi, have large factions of their own, so they are not exactly weak. We will see more clearly whether this is the case five or ten years from now toward the latter half of Xi’s rule.

You also discuss the “coalition of the strong” in the 1950s. What led to the emergence of the “coalition of the strong” and how did such a coalition affect elite politics? Can a “coalition of the strong” emerge in today’s China?

As our mutual acquaintance, Huang Jing, points out, the “mountaintops” emerged in elite politics due to the prolonged guerrilla struggle that the various base areas engaged in against both the KMT and the Japanese in the 1930s and 1940s. This bred a sense of loyalty, which persisted after 1949, between the senior leaders of the base areas and the more junior officials. When the heads of these base areas became national leaders in the 1950s, they each could count on a sizeable network of local and even central officials who would do their bidding. Thus, these highly networked officials constituted “coalitions of the strong.” Mao controlled them by playing them against each other. Both the purge of Gao Gang and the purge of Peng Dehuai are examples of this. This worked until the Great Leap Forward led to widespread rebuke of Mao’s policies. He then had to purge these well-connected officials wholesale and pursue a “coalition of the weak” strategy. In recent years, because of Xi’s purges in the PLA and in the security services, I do not think any official can stand up to him, certainly not after Wang Qishan’s exit from the Politburo Standing Committee in 2017. The new PSC members are all sycophants with limited factions, except for Li Xi. Although not completely weak, I also do not see the new PSC members standing up to Xi, regardless of the policy outcomes.

How did the “coalition of the weak” strategy contribute to the rise of Xi in the post-Deng era? Did you consider a slightly different dynamic – “the weeding out of the strong” in an autocratic regime – in this process?

Yes, in a sense a “weeding out of the strong” is a mechanism remarkably similar to the “coalitions of the weak.” The Long Marchers in the 1980s resisted promoting the princelings too rapidly because they were seen as being too connected and too meddlesome. Instead, the veterans chose as successors technocrats with thin networks. This selection weeded out many princelings from elite politics by the 2000s, thus allowing only the few princelings who survived to dominate in the party. Of course, the princelings fought each other a bit, especially among Xi, Bo Xilai, and Li Yuanchao. However, after the fights were settled, Xi dominated the party.

When you look at the line-up of the top leadership after the 20th CCP Congress, do you see new evidence of Xi’s “coalition of the weak” strategy? Given the daunting challenges he faces, might this strategy imperil the survival of the CCP regime?

For now, Xi seems to be going for a factional strategy of promoting those whom he trusts. These include three of his former secretaries, Cai Qi, Li Qiang, and Ding Xuexiang. The other two PSC members, Li Xi and Zhao Leji, have deep familial ties with Xi. The only PSC member who fits the “weak” profile is Wang Huning, who has an exceedingly small elite network because he served as a think-tanker for most of his career. Because these factional members come from different tendencies in the faction, Xi can count on a mutual balancing to prevent one of them from trumping the others. If an ambitious individual emerges among the new PSC members, Xi may be forced to purge one or more of them and perhaps also to institute a coalition of the weak strategy. In the short term, this factional strategy with some power balancing should work sufficiently well to be able to preserve the regime. However, the quality of policy making likely will deteriorate. For one, all the new members of the PSC got to their positions by agreeing with and supporting Xi’s policies, regardless of their merits. They will continue to support and implement Xi’s policies without question, and in fact they will accuse anyone who does not support Xi’s policies of “deviation,” which may increase their status in Xi’s eyes. Of course, this makes any change of bad policies incredibly difficult. The continuation of the Zero-Covid policy is a case in point. Although Zero-Covid will not undermine regime longevity in the short run, it will slow growth and cause a large amount of suffering in China.

How will Xi’s “coalition of the weak” strategy affect the power succession struggle in the coming years and after Xi’s departure from the scene?

During the next few years, if a power struggle among Xi’s followers grows out of hand, he may opt for a “coalition of the weak” strategy. A situation similar to the politics of 1967 may emerge whereby the survivors of the 1966 purge squabbled with one another, leading to more purges that ultimately brought the leadership to a weak coalition. In essence, Mao wanted to preserve the veterans in power after 1966, including Chen Yi, Tan Zhenlin, and Tao Zhu. Yet, instead of ruling in an uneasy coalition with the radicals, especially Zhang Chunqiao and Jiang Qing, these veterans attacked the Red Guard movement during a “ruckus” in Huairentang, surprising even Zhou Enlai. In the end, even those veterans whom Mao liked were purged. Of course, the exception is Xu Xiangqian, a senior member of the Fourth Front Army group whom Mao needed to balance against Lin Biao. Thus, if we see another “ruckus” among officials in Xi’s faction, another round of purges may ensue, which will lead to the promotion of more junior, and weaker, officials to the senior ranks.