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Assessing the Leadership of the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China: Xi Jinping

Abstract

President Xi Jinping is a pivotal actor on the world stage and holds powerful positions within both the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party. Assessing the president of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) is an increasingly important subject as the United States shifts more diplomatic and military resources to Pacific to implement their Pivot to Asian strategy. The aim of this paper is to evaluate academic literature that focuses on Xi Jinping as the current leader of the People's Republic of China. That information will then be analyzed using techniques derived from literature on political leadership studies such as political psychology. The literature from two schools of political leadership study will be applied to the presidency of Xi Jinping resulting in a comprehensive assessment of his leadership style.

Keywords

Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping, leadership

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Abstract

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Introduction

Xi Jinping, Chairman of the Central Military Commission took over as the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP) in 2012. He was born in Beijing to Xi Zhongxuan, an original leader of the CCP during the time of Mao Zedong. Xi Jinping was privileged to have a good education despite his youth working among peasants in lice-infested fields and living in a cave in the western provinces. After being forced to leave Beijing, he worked his way into the CCP at an early age, always supporting the Communist Party and working hard as provincial secretary of both rural and urban centers in the Fujian province. His upbringing and allegiance to the CCP may

play a role in the style of his leadership. There are also environmental factors of politics at play, which may account for his actions during his presidency, as well as any future actions. The weakening of the Chinese Communist Party, as well as regional and global power politics with Washington, Tokyo, Moscow, and Pyongyang, may be forcing Xi Jinping to act in ways he otherwise would not. The relationship between Washington and Beijing is becoming increasingly significant in the 21st century as China grows into a peer competitor to the long established primacy of the United States. Events such as the pro-Democracy protests in the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, disputes over the Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku Islands), and an increasingly erratic North Korea have promoted increased cooperation and brinkmanship between the two powers. A lot is at stake, and the largest regional actor is being led by a man who should be assessed if the United States is to determine how to act and react to his actions, and defend its interests. This begs the question: Is Xi Jinping leading China based on his own individual leadership style, or is he being affected by systemic or domestic pressures that are out of his control?

Xi Jinping: The Individual

An individual's background can predict a lot about his character, personality, and leadership style. Growing up as a believer in the CCP, as well as being well educated, Xi steadily worked his way up the political hierarchy until the mid-1980s, where his career in the CCP reached a new level. Garnaut (2012) explains that "when Xi describes himself as 'always a son of the

Yellow Earth [Referring to agriculture around the Yangtze River],’ he was setting up his personal narrative as a leader, who has toiled with the masses, in contrast with increasingly corrupt governing elite.” Xi was born in 1953 and was fortunate to move from Beijing to the western provinces as a child. The Cultural Revolution rocked Beijing, and he was spared from taking part in the red terror. Having experience in both rural and urban environments, as well as in different levels of government and bureaucracy, Xi Jinping “acquired a reputation as a realistic, efficient, and relaxed Party Secretary, conscious of the need for China to move towards a market economy” (Cabestan 2012). Described as a modernizer, Cabestan (2012) analyzes Xi Jinping’s political motives, explaining how “he tried to improve and simplify the administrative machine ... [and] make the processes of selection and promotion of government cadres more transparent.” Moreover, Xi is simultaneously described as a realist in that he is conscious of environmental issues, needs to upgrade industry for the 21st Century. He is also aware of conflicts between domestic leaders in business; he operates off of the slogan, ‘coordination and balance.’ In sum, Cabestan (2012) profiles Xi Jinping as a conservative but flexible modernizer, assessing him as “pragmatic, a modernizer, and even reformist.” On the contrary, Cabestan (2012) also assesses Xi to be “a cautious, orthodox leader, unwilling in his actions, style, and even more so in his private life to depart from the norm authorized by the Party and to expose himself to attacks by his detractors.” Xi is a good organizer and coordinator. He was able to put these traits into practice successfully in 2008 while in charge of the preparations for the Beijing Olympic Games.

Miller (2008) provides an assessment of the new Politburo, which includes Xi Jinping as leader of the Standing Committee. The Politburo oversees the Communist Party of China and the power is consolidated in the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). Miller states that “the new Politburo leadership attributes over the past two decades has increased...It is the best-educated leadership in PRC history, less thoroughly technocratic, and still starkly civilian in experience.” Xi leads the Politburo with advanced degrees in law and chemical engineering. As Miller (2013) explains, one of the first things Xi did in office was to downsize the nine member Politburo Standing Committee to seven members. This may have been an effort to consolidate his power and isolate executive decision making from the rest of the CCP. Xi Jinping’s leadership style can be described as unilateral in the methods of his thinking, although he has to reconcile his aspirations with the reality posed by the structure of the Chinese government.

Xi Jinping is further attempting to change the agenda of Chinese grand strategy. Formerly, the Chinese grand strategy focused on economic development, while today Xi is more interested in fostering Chinese hegemony in the region. Chen (2014) suggests that “Xi seems to have shifted from [Deng Xiaoping’s] ‘keeping a low profile’ principle” of Chinese national strategy. Chen (2014) goes on to explain, “what has been emphasized is the need to be active in foreign affairs because without this it would be impossible to realize the Chinese Dream and the great national rejuvenation which Xi has emphasized.” The Chinese Dream describes a set of personal and national ideals in the People's Republic of China and the Communist Party of China. It is used by journalists, government officials, and activists to describe the role of the individual in Chinese society as well as the

goals of the ‘Chinese nation.’ This is incredibly important because both the CCP, as well as the State Council, have strongly opposed the shift away from a focus on domestic economic development that has been used to foster the Chinese Dream. Chen (2014) argues that “also important is how Chinese leaders assess the international environment in the future.” Assertive foreign policy behavior from Beijing and ultimately Xi Jinping will lead to them acting ambitiously based on the belief that China is still in a period of strategic opportunity and confidence. This is evidence that Xi is acting against the political environment and leading based on personal goals and ambition.

Elizabeth Economy (2014) states that “Chinese President Xi Jinping has articulated a simple but powerful vision: the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” During a time of political weakness within the CCP, Economy (2014) states that “Xi has reacted to this sense of malaise with a power grab—for himself, for the Communist Party, and for China. Xi rejected the communist tradition of collective leadership, instead establishing himself as the paramount leader within a tightly centralized political system.” Domestically, Xi put forth economic reforms that would bolster the market while allowing the state to retain significant control. He sought to elevate China by expanding trade and investment, creating new international institutions, and strengthening the military. This is his vision, his agenda, and it goes against the policy of ‘lying low,’ which has been in place since the 1990s. Economy (2014) argues that although “the roots of Xi’s foreign policy predate his presidency—he has replaced the decades-old mantra of the former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, ‘hide brightness, cherish obscurity,’ with a far more expansive and muscular foreign policy.” Economy (2014) further states that

“Xi’s nationalist rhetoric and assertive military posture pose a direct challenge to U.S. interests in the region and call for a vigorous response.” This is a significant divergence from the CCP strategy of focusing on developing stable market relations within the region and with the United States.

Beyond foreign policy agenda, is the number one objective for the People’s Republic today, ‘the Chinese Dream.’ Bin He (2013) writes that “the China Dream as Xi Jinping puts it is the ‘great renaissance’ of the Chinese nation—Xi is trying to project the vision that China will be number one; China will be back on top and lead the world.” Although the China Dream, or Chinese Dream, may seem like a reboot of Hu Jintao’s two 100-year plans, Xi has made it his own and is using it to solidify the CCPs position until at least the next decade. For Xi, the continuity of the Communist Party is a priority, especially now in a time of waning influence caused by widespread corruption. He (2013) argues that “understanding Xi’s dream is of great importance—it may provide some clue as to which direction Xi will lead China.” It is evident today that Xi favors an assertive China that is active in international affairs; Xi is doing as much as he can to push his agenda forward without being put into the light of the CCP. Essentially, Xi is acting on his plans while being conservative enough as to not draw too much attention from the Communist establishment.

Individual Style Analysis

The study of individual leadership styles, characteristics, and personality is difficult to execute without quantifiable measurements, but it can be easier by comparing specific cases. Most heads of government are privileged with the duty to command their nation on the international stage as the principal foreign affairs officer.

The President of the United States (POTUS) is the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces; the President of China, Xi Jinping is the Chairman of the Central Military Commission as well as the head of government. Xi, like the POTUS, has the ability to control military forces and interact with other international actors as the principal statesman; both chief military commander and chief diplomat. Observing Xi Jinping's leadership in relation to Chinese foreign affairs is therefore a methodologically sound way to assess his presidency, because compared to domestic affairs Xi has more control over decision making.

In order to truly understand Xi Jinping as a leader, it is important to assess him as an individual. According to David Winter (2013), "[O]ne of the central axioms of political psychology is that political structures and actions are shaped and channeled by people's personalities—that is, by their individually patterned integration of processes of perception, memory, judgment, goal-seeking, and emotional expression and regulation." This is interesting because it suggests that presidential personality can shape the outcomes of very important political structures.

Dyson and Preston state that "individual complexity has been linked to how attentive or sensitive individuals are to information from their surrounding political or policy environments and to the extent to which they require information from when making decisions" (2006, 267). Interestingly, individual complexity has been linked to a leader's style of decision making, use of advisors, and the way they process information within their decision groups. The indicator of a true presidential style and trait emerges during a time of national emergency. In particular, when foreign policy decisions must be made immediately, the president must use and in

turn reveal his true character, leadership style, and cognitive ability. Xi Jinping is a hard core Chinese Communist with a life expressed by hard work and self-reliance. From the literature on Xi as an individual, it is clear that he is cautious but ambitious, coordinated and balanced. Xi is not one to publically 'toe the party line' and privately follow the status quo. Even though he wants the same ends as the Central Committee, a strong China, he wants to achieve those ends by a different set of means. His agenda, the China Dream, is an excellent example. Although taken from his processor Hu Jintao, as He (2013) states, Xi has made it his own, with his own agenda. Moreover, Xi has exhibited assertiveness as well as high achievement striving not only by way of his rise in the political sphere but when he was nominated president by the Politburo he changed the institution, the Politburo Standing Committee, from nine members to seven.

Xi Jinping: Leading the Political Behemoth

China's government and communist party structure is complex, corrupt, and massive. The CCP alone has over 80 million members as staff, bureaucrats, or in leadership positions. The State Council, the Politburo (Political Bureau), and the Central Military Commission (CMC) exhibit immense clout over national decision-making and implementation. Cheng (2013) argues that "China's 'economy-first' mentality toward [Northeast Asia] remains unchanged from the previous administration of [Hu Jintao]—This means that vigorous growth during Xi's first term will be critical." Cheng (2013) looks back at the Hu Jintao's administration and how a focus on regional stability and economic growth was in line with China's grand strategy. In the PRC, development of the market comes first and Xi is going to have to reconcile with

that reality. Cheng (2013) cites a “split” within China’s government:

on one hand...China naturally nurtures ambitions to return to its former primacy and to be accepted as a regional leader China needs to pass the tests of regional leadership, including the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula—On the other hand...China still wants North Korea’s cooperation as a bulwark against a U.S. aligned movement on its periphery.

This poses a major challenge for Xi and his government. As he attempts to push forth his own agenda, the more real bulwark may be the CCP.

In addition to this, Xi is faced with increasing opposition to implement his more assertive agenda of regional primacy. Christensen (2011) argues that “Beijing’s new, more truculent posture is rooted in an exaggerated sense of China’s rise in global power and serious domestic political insecurity—As a result, Chinese policymakers are hypersensitive to nationalist criticism at home and more rigid, at times even arrogant, in response to perceived challenges abroad.” Xi must balance both domestic and international pressures while pursuing his agenda. It is becoming increasingly difficult to pursue the modernization of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) and regional hegemony if there is still support for a focus on economic development and neutral relations with the international community. Although Xi Jinping is described as a modernizer, Christensen (2011) explains that “driven by the fear of a precipitous collapse of a neighboring communist regime and the reduction of Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing has fallen back on long-held conservative Communist Party

foreign policy principles in backing North Korea.” Moreover, a weakening of the CCP in recent years has led to increased zeal from China’s top leaders. This has enabled Xi to clean up the CCP and pursue an effective anti-corruption campaign that has brought down several high-ranking CCP officers, both civilian and military, however there is increased pressure on Xi himself.

Additionally, Xi’s vision for the modernization of the PLA may be difficult to attain. Garnaut (2013) uses a quote by Mao Zedong to argue his point: “the people’s army is not merely an organ for fighting; it is an organ for the political advancement of the party.” He claims that Mao’s statement has been confirmed by all of his successors and that “Xi may be able to build a military that either is modern and capable or loyal and political—But many in China now believe he can’t have both” (Garnaut 2013). Xi has to pursue his agenda against the status quo and although it seems as if he is doing this successfully, there are forces within the CCP acting against him. The largest problems are dissent within the Politburo against the shift in the PLA, as well as the more urgent problem of unchecked corruption throughout the entire military apparatus.

Assessment of the Working Environment

The Chinese government is a complex mass of positions that enable centralized control and communal decision making. The Chinese Communist Party consists of the National Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party that elects the 200 or so members of the Central Committee. The Central Committee then selects the 25 member Politburo that in turn ‘elects’ the nine [now seven] members of the Politburo Standing Committee. Xi Jinping is the General Secretary of the Party, the Head of State, and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission. The

Politburo oversees the Secretariat which in turn oversees the implementation of the Politburo Standing Committee's agenda. The Government of the Peoples Republic of China is separate but equal to the CCP, and consists of the National People's Congress (NPC). The NPC is the unicameral legislature that oversees the State Council which is the civil service equivalent to the Politburo, and has equal domestic clout albeit they work together. To reiterate, China's complex and massive civil service system, as well as the separate and equally massive and complex Communist Party system, greatly hinders the effectiveness of any single person in power.

To put this into methodological perspective, pluralist theorists such as Theodore Lowi (1985), and rational choice theorists such as Terry Moe (1993) contend that the modern presidency "is so institutionalized, and to such a degree a prisoner of excessive public expectations and other external constraints, that the personality of the occupant matters relatively little in terms of political outcomes." A central criticism from both pluralists and rational choice theorists is that "personality theory is a quagmire of illusive concepts, intuition, and subjective frameworks" (George 1974; Greenstein 1969). If the Chinese presidency is any indicator of institutionalized leadership, the personal character and ambitions of Xi Jinping matter little to none in the grand scope of the CCP.

Research on political leadership and decision making suggests that leaders vary systematically in their orientations toward constraints. The article by Johnathan Keller develops an integrative theoretical framework that explicitly incorporates these insights and applies them to the domain of crisis decision making. "Leaders' scores on key characteristics (based on at-a-distance assessment methods) are used to identify

their expected inclination to challenge or respect domestic constraints" (Keller 2005, 837). Interestingly, the logic behind this argument lies in the context of the individual's presidency, administration, etc. "Domestic constraints that presumably excerpt either a pacifying or incendiary influence on decision makers include public opinion, power-sharing institutional arrangements, institutionalized opposition, and norms involving dispute resolution" (Keller 2005, 837). Normalized models assume that these external constraints are extremely powerful and are unlikely to be circumvented by decision makers.

Although, research also suggests that the assumed causal mechanisms underlying the constraints suggests that "most of these are appropriately viewed as potential constraints vis-à-vis the immediate decision making process" (Keller 2005, 837). Moreover, differentiation in leadership styles will allow decision makers to react and act differently within varied domestic political constraints. The grand hypothesis that Keller puts forth is that "one of the defining attributes of constraint challengers is their reliance upon internal belief, principals, and perceptions as a guide to decision making" (2005, 843). It is difficult to believe otherwise that this is not suggesting that external factors play a role in decision making processes of leaders. The biggest constraint put on the CCP are domestic, nationalistic rhetoric and civil protest against corruption are putting a lot of pressure on the Chinese government.

Even in the area of international affairs, Xi Jinping is restricted by the other members of the Politburo who, as a collective, decide on the agenda of the CCP. China has a grand strategy that's sole objective is Chinese primacy on the international stage, as well as domestic development of a market based economy. China dreams of being a global hegemon, an economic superpower, and to have the

China Dream. The literature is clear about these aspirations, but it is also clear that Xi Jinping has a lot of pressure coming from Beijing.

Personal Analysis: Individual versus Systemic Affect

Xi Jinping is one of the most powerful men on the earth as the President of China. He is the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party as well as the Chairman of the Central Military Commission. Both institutions represent a large degree of clout, both domestically and internationally. Xi is a determined leader, one who is doing what he can to make sure his agenda is implemented, and he is doing so in a way that he will not be stopped by the vast CCP political machine. Intelligent and driven, coordinated and balanced, Xi Jinping is leading. On the other hand, Xi is restricted by a complex and redundant system of government that is collectively responsible for China's future. Both the Central Committee and the Politburo put immense institutional pressures on the presidency that may have great effect on any individual actions that Xi may otherwise make. China has a reputation for being cautious and remaining neutral. This may be attributed to these outside forces preventing Xi, or any other PRC leader for that matter, from being the statesman they want to be; they are preventing Xi from being assertive and decisive on the world stage.

Literature Assessment

There are inherent problems with literature of this kind. First, Xi Jinping is a sitting president, and academic literature assessing his presidency is few and far between. Moreover, a lot of the literature originating out of China is censored or fabricated, so all analyses of Chinese sources were conducted cautiously. The

structure of Chinese politics is large, complex, and enigmatic. Transparency and efficiency are not a strong suit for the government or the party, therefore information regarding the two may be distorted or fragmented. Additionally, Xi Jinping is known to act in the shadows, meaning that he will do or say something that cannot be easily traced back to him.

Literature was vague and had to be assessed in depth; some authors did not write about Xi's leadership directly, but wrote more directly on the challenges that he and the CPP are facing. This information was difficult to propagate into a coherent review because the individual and the systemic effects in regards to leadership studies were hardly addressed directly. The sources that were reviewed mostly used evidence derived from speculation or from Xi's past before his presidency. This information was useful to gain an idea of what might be happening in Beijing, but it is nothing compared to first-hand knowledge of Xi Jinping.

Research into the political psychology of presidents and the effect on foreign policy decision-making is as complex as it is divided. Two distinct schools are constantly evolving and developing theories and hypotheses in order to understand how certain policy outcomes occur. On one side of the argument, researchers believe the environment of the leader shapes policy, whether it is systemic, domestic, and/or the administration itself. On the other hand, researchers argue and develop methodologies to test the theory that individual presidential or leader personality and behavior drives policy outcomes. Both sides have a substantial amount of quality research that they employ to back up their claims.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping is an ambitious leader. He is a modernizer and a reformer who is attempting to balance with a hard line communist party background. Chinese politics are complex; on one hand great effort is made to maintain the CCP's legitimacy, but on the other hand great effort is also put into developing a globally integrated market economy. The size and scope of the Chinese government and party hinder the individual ability of Xi Jinping to act as he wishes, to be assertive and effective. Xi is an intelligent person who has years of experience within the CCP, however and he knows how to play the system in order to get what he wants without being caught. Xi Jinping is a dynamic leader; a leader who can be both a great reformer and also an old-school communist conservative. Overall, there simply is not enough quantitative or qualitative data that is empirically accurate enough to connect claims of causation. As for the external variables, without clear examples and an empirically significant section of cases to reinforce causal claims, the theories will never be able to transition into fact. The hypothesis that systemic, domestic, or administrative variables can have effect on presidential decision-making is sound however, gathering and applying data is difficult and rarely is not qualitative in nature. As for Xi Jinping, the CCP has attempted to hold the status quo, but it simply was not enough to contain their leader. Xi has cracked down on corruption, created the AIIB bank, acted aggressively in the South China Sea, and has expanded Chinese affairs into Africa. Moreover, Xi has no desire to step down from his position; he has not made any attempt to prepare a successor and has made it obvious that he intends to remain leader of China well into the 2020s. Due to this clear assertion of intention, it is more likely that Xi is running

China than it is China that is running Xi. His individual leadership is greater than both systemic and domestic pressures.

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