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in Post-Xi Jinping Era*

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Contents

Executive Summary	VI
1 Introduction	1
2 From Deng to Jiang: A Partial, Imperfect Solution	4
3 Xi Consolidates Control	7
4 Four Possible Scenarios	10
<i>Scenario One: Orderly Transition in 2022</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Scenario Two: Xi Prepares a Succession Plan to Retire at 21st Party Congress in 2027 or the 22nd Party Congress in 2032</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Scenario Three: Leadership Challenge or Coup</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Scenario Four: Unexpected Death or Incapacitation</i>	<i>16</i>
5 Conclusion	19
About the Authors	20

Executive Summary

“In any personal dictatorship or tyranny, one thing is certain: someday there will be a succession crisis. That dread day casts a long shadow before, influencing the period of dictatorial rule by anticipation.”

— Myron Rush, *The Khrushchev Succession Problem*, 1962¹

After nearly nine years in office, Xi Jinping now stands as the overwhelmingly dominant figure in China’s political system, having gained command of the military, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) apparatus, and diplomatic and economic policymaking, all while sidelining or locking up rivals to his leadership. His drive for power, however, has destabilised elite political consensus and dismantled power-sharing norms that evolved since the 1980s. By removing de jure term limits on the office of the presidency – and thus far refusing to nominate his successor for this and his other leadership positions – Xi has solidified his own authority at the expense of the most important political reform of the last four decades: the regular and peaceful transfer of power. In doing so, he has pushed China towards a potential destabilising succession crisis, one with profound implications for the international order and global commerce.

This paper assesses China’s possible leadership succession scenarios in the coming years and decades. Is Xi akin to Stalin after the purges of the 1930s – a leader who has so thoroughly eliminated rivals and cowed the system that he will remain in power until he can no longer perform the duties of office, leaving a succession battle in his wake? Or will the system produce a Newtonian reaction against his all-encompassing power, either forcing him out of office prematurely or at least pushing him to set a timetable for his departure? Alternatively, what are Xi’s options for a middle path between these scenarios, an orderly succession in the next 5 to 10 years?

Introduction

The peaceful, orderly, and regular transfer of power, while largely taken for granted in modern democracies, remains a source of conflict and instability around the world. As the recent effort by former president Donald Trump to discredit the electoral victory of President Joe Biden demonstrates, even in democratic systems with robust legal procedures and long-standing conventions governing the peaceful transfer of power, succession can be more precarious than commonly imagined. From Malaysia to North Korea, Burundi to Russia, insufficient or impotent legal and political constraints allow incumbents to remain in power for indeterminate time periods, often indefinitely. Where legal processes are more robust, leaders intent on remaining in office often preemptively sideline or even jail political opponents. While some autocrats are able to remain in office for life, efforts to hold power indefinitely can also trigger succession crises, formal leadership challenges, or – at the extreme – military coups.

China, under the rule of the CCP, is not immune to these realities. Scholar Bruce Dickson described leadership succession as “the central drama of Chinese politics almost since the beginning of the People’s Republic in 1949.”² During the Mao Zedong era, leadership battles were frequent and fierce, from the “Gao Gang Affair” in the early 1950s to Mao’s one-time chosen heir Lin Biao, who perished in a mysterious plane crash while fleeing China in 1971.³ Another potential successor, Liu Shaoqi, was sidelined by Mao and beaten by Red Guards before dying in captivity in 1969. In late 1976, the “Gang of Four” was arrested just months after Mao’s death. Mao’s handpicked successor, Hua Guofeng, was himself sidelined by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. The two leaders chosen by Deng to take charge of the CCP, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, were both unseated from power in the late 1980s amid intense political turmoil and elite infighting. Such leadership crises are dangerous on many levels, not least because they threaten to magnify instability by exposing divisions within the ruling elite to the public.



A picture released by Chinese official agency shows President Mao Zedong (C) on May 27, 1976 in Beijing during his meeting with Pakistani Prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (2 L).

Source: AFP/Getty Images

Looking back in history, instability and volatility have long been features of Chinese politics. According to Harvard University's Wang Yuhua, of the 282 emperors ruling across 49 dynasties, roughly half were deposed by being "murdered, overthrown, forced to abdicate, or forced to commit suicide."⁴ Less than half designated a successor, and the majority of those only did so in the final years of their reign. These successors were themselves regularly murdered by rival members of the political elite.

While the fallout from previous Chinese dynastic power struggles was largely limited to within its borders, the global impact of a twenty-first century succession crisis would be immense. Indeed, under Xi Jinping, the likelihood of a succession crisis grows daily, as he continues to concentrate political power and personalise his rule in contravention of decades of evolving (albeit imperfect and limited) political norms. Since coming to power in late 2012, he has eviscerated the few formal constraints and de facto conventions that were implemented to curtail leadership struggles in the post-Mao era. As it stands, Xi and the senior leadership in Beijing have been silent on how long he plans to remain in power. Owing to the sensitivity of the matter, only a small handful of senior party officials are likely to have any idea of Xi's longer-term plans.

Xi is the single most important political figure in a country with the world's largest population, second-largest economy, and second-largest active-duty military force, as well as a growing arsenal of nuclear weapons. From global economic volatility to ripple effects for the 14 countries that share a land border with China, to say nothing of concerns over China's significant stockpiles of nuclear and conventional weapons and its territorial claims, the risks flowing from domestic instability are enormous.

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For these reasons, this report has undertaken a preliminary investigation of possible leadership succession scenarios, ranging from the sudden death or incapacitation of Xi Jinping to an overt leadership challenge or coup. The study does not claim the ability to predict the future. Instead, the main argument put forward here is that it is imperative for governments, militaries, and global businesses to be prepared for future political volatility, including a Chinese leadership that devolves into infighting, instability, and intrigue. If Xi clings to power well into old age, the political system will likely calcify into structures of rigid repression, which creates its own set of challenges. The implications for the rest of the world from either scenario are immense, as are the costs for ignoring the reality of China's current political trajectory.

This report begins with a historical overview of China's post-Mao efforts to normalise leadership succession, followed by a brief discussion of Xi Jinping's efforts to undo many of these recent constraints. It then turns to an analysis of four possible succession scenarios and what they mean for Chinese politics and the rest of the world.

From Deng to Jiang

A Partial, Imperfect Solution

In the shorthand of news reports, Xi Jinping’s abolition of presidential term-limits in early 2018 was the overturning of the most important legal constraint put in place by Deng Xiaoping a quarter of a century earlier to prevent a repeat of Mao Zedong’s dictatorial rule. In truth, the two-term limit for the presidency – formalised in the constitution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1982 – was the beginning of the incremental, imperfect, and, as it turned out, fragile process of institutionalising elite politics.⁵ Although regular and orderly transitions of top leadership came to be considered the cornerstone of this process, this in fact only took place once in a fully-fledged manner: when Xi himself took office in 2012, succeeding Hu Jintao.⁶

Deng’s imposition of term limits for the office of the presidency had limited applicability when it was introduced in 1982. For starters, it did not restrict Deng himself, whose real power was wielded informally, as well as through his official position as chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), which he relinquished in 1989. Even after his formal “retirement,” Deng continued to be the most dominant figure in China’s political system. Further, the position of president was, and remains, relatively weak when compared to the roles of CCP general secretary and CMC chair.

Limitations aside, the introduction of de jure term limits was nonetheless meaningful, for it signalled that the CCP wanted to avoid a return to the one-man rule that had predominated since the beginning of the Mao period. Ending—or at least limiting—the unpredictability of succession politics which typified the Mao era was very much a concern for modernisers within the political system. As Yan Jiaqi, the former director of the Institute of Political Research of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, wrote in late 1979:

The history of socialism in the past sixty years makes it plain that whenever there is a system of life-tenure for the highest Party and state leaders, [a cult of personality] commonly occurs.

Although it begins with an emphasis on collective leadership and the promotion of democracy, it culminates in an arbitrary rule that destroys collective leadership while safeguarding the power of the individual.⁷

The orderly transition of power at the executive level — covering the presidency, and by extension, the position of CCP general secretary and chair of the CMC — became the centrepiece of elite political reform over time. But it was just one of many formal and informal reforms that began in the early 1980s to limit the ability of party officials at any level to build political fiefdoms and independent centres of power that could frustrate or contravene policy emanating from Beijing. Senior provincial leaders, for example, were appointed from outside the province itself. An “up-or-out” system of age limits was put in place for both the Central Committee (no older than 63) and the Politburo (no older than 68). These party rules inevitably flowed into government positions as well. By capping the age at which one could join the Central Committee, the party stopped anyone older than 63 from becoming a provincial party secretary, governor, or member of the State Council.

As in any political system, these rules were moulded by the short-term considerations. In 1997, then-general secretary Jiang Zemin pushed out a Politburo rival, Qiao Shi, by declaring a 70-year-old retirement rule, even though Jiang himself was 71 at the time.⁸ Jiang successfully pulled off a similar manoeuvre in 2002, now lowering the age limit to join the Politburo to 68, thus ending the career of another rival, Li Ruihan. Despite the circumstances of their creation, these rule changes have had an enduring impact.



General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Jiang Zemin and Chairman of the Central Military Commission Deng Xiaoping.

Source: Patrick Durand/Sygma/Getty Images

While the position of CCP general secretary is not constrained by de jure term limits, by fusing the job with that of president and military leader from early 1993, the CCP effectively, if informally, set the general secretary's tenure at two five-year terms. It also created a new expectation that the three top titles (CCP general secretary, CMC chair, and PRC president) would be concurrently held by one individual. Deng Xiaoping was driven by short-term considerations in allowing Jiang Zemin to take all three top jobs, as he was trying to insulate him from potential challengers.⁹ But the flip side of making the leader supremely powerful was the implicit understanding that he would also step aside after two terms.

The person who benefitted most from the emerging norms of elite politics was Xi himself. He was formally anointed as Hu Jintao's successor at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, in preparation to take the top job five years later. At the 18th Party Congress in 2012, Xi assumed the country's two most important offices, CCP general secretary and CMC chairman, and became PRC president the following March at the next session of the National People's Congress. Jiang Zemin had handed over the first two titles to Hu Jintao in late 2002 and early 2003, but—straining under the conventions of term limits himself—he delayed handing over the military chair for two years. Hu, on the other hand, relinquished all three titles to Xi at once, a move that can either be explained by his lack of political authority within the system or by his intention to give Xi more room to pursue his own agenda. By contrast, Hu himself had to contend with constant manoeuvring from Jiang and his allies during his 10 years in office.

The handover of power to Xi in 2012 was seen by many external observers as a historic turning point in Chinese elite politics. The formal and orderly process of transition was depicted as something which had evolved into a permanent feature of the system. "Succession itself has become a Party institution," wrote two scholars, mirroring what was becoming conventional wisdom.¹⁰ Ding Yijiang argued, "the five-year term of office for a maximum of two consecutive terms has been further established and become a primary feature of China's leadership system."¹¹ Prior to Xi's abolishment of presidential term limits in 2018, CCP scholars and officials had highlighted the 1982 constitutional limits on power as a bedrock constraint on the life-long tenure of senior leaders.¹² Han Dayuan, dean of Renmin University's law school—a position with vice-ministerial status in the party-state—argued in a 2018 article that the constitutional term limits provided an "effective constraint on life-long tenure, a fairly good prevention of personal power concentration and the emergence of a personality cult."¹³

Xi Consolidates Control

The new norms of succession were widely accepted within the party until early 2018, when articles in state media appeared arguing that the three titles of CCP general secretary, CMC chair, and PRC president needed to remain unified (三位一体). The Chinese-language version of the *Global Times* published an editorial in February, later reposted by Xinhua, which stated, “the removal of the term limit through constitutional amendment is helpful in protecting unity in the three offices and improving the leadership system of the Party and the country.”¹⁴ To achieve this policy outcome, Xi could have added term limits on the party and military positions to bring them into line with the presidency. Instead, he focused on removing the two-term limit on the office of the presidency – the option that has paved the way for him to remain in power after the 20th Party Congress in 2022. There were other signs in late 2017 that Xi was clearing the way to indefinite tenure. Two up-and-coming officials whose career tracks had positioned them as potential successors to Xi – Hu Chunhua and Sun Zhengcai – were both eliminated from the running. Sun was detained for alleged corruption in August that year, while two months later, Hu failed to win promotion to the Politburo inner circle at the 19th Party Congress, removing him from immediate consideration for the top job.

But if the groundwork was being laid for a constitutional amendment to remove the term limit at the annual session of the National People’s Congress in March 2018, not everyone noticed.¹⁵ The announcement that Xi would now become, in effect, leader in perpetuity caused shock, anger, and dismay among some party elites. As late as May 2020, a former professor at the Central Party School in Beijing, Cai Xia, complained bitterly that the constitutional change had been sprung on the Central Committee. “He forced everyone at the [Plenum] to swallow the revision like he was stuffing dogshit down their throats,” she said in a widely circulated speech. “So many Central Committee members were at the session, yet not one dared to raise this issue.”¹⁶ The official press, perhaps because of the seismic implications of the change, played it down.

It is notable that Xi’s suggestion to abolish presidential term limits – but not, it should be pointed out, the age restrictions or term limits for any other high office – came less than one month before the 19th Party Congress in late 2017. This was a meeting dominated by Xi and which cemented his position as an unrivalled political tactician and bureaucratic infighter.¹⁷ His forcing through of the constitutional amendment was the culmination of a power consolidation that began almost as soon as he took office in 2012. The anti-corruption campaign Xi launched in 2013 was key to establishing his authority over the system and served as an important tool for boosting his own position. The campaign allowed him to increase his popular appeal by combatting the universally reviled scourge of official graft and political privilege while also sidelining rivals and instilling fear up and down the bureaucratic hierarchy. At the same time, Xi utilised ideological campaigns to enforce tighter political boundaries over speech, thought, expression, and debate, thus squeezing space for permissible disagreement and dissent over policy choices. His major efforts on “governance modernisation” have significantly eroded the responsibilities and authority of the PRC State Council (i.e., the government) in favour of increased de facto and de jure power for the CCP. Gone are the days when the general secretary of the CCP and the State Council premier acted as a political and governing team.¹⁸ Under Xi, the division between the party and the government has disappeared, with the former subsuming the latter. As a result, Premier Li Keqiang has been largely relegated to second-tier status in policy formulation.



A portrait of Chinese President Xi Jinping looks is carried during the parade for the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, on October 01, 2019 in at Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China.

Source: Andrea Verdelli/Getty Images

While the CCP constitution bans personality cults, Xi has actively used individual propaganda campaigns to solidify his own power.¹⁹ While far less extreme than the deification of Mao Zedong during the height of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-to-late 1960s, Xi has done more than recent leaders to elevate his status within the CCP, ranging from his self-designation as the “core” of the CCP Central Committee in 2016 to the promulgation of the related “two safeguards” (两个维护) in early 2019, which called for all party members to “safeguard” both Xi’s status as the core and the unrivalled leadership of the party’s Central Committee.²⁰ Since the announcement of the “two safeguards,” the phrase has become standard political language in key government and CCP documents, including the communique of the 4th Plenum in October 2019 and Li Keqiang’s government work report in May 2020.

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Hardening political conformity under Xi, combined with the more banal realities of bureaucratic politics, have led to numerous officials publicly declaring fealty to Xi, either out of an instinct for political survival or owing to their own ambition.²¹ In November 2019, Politburo member Ding Xuexiang argued:

The “two safeguards” are essentially one body. To maintain the core position of General Secretary Xi Jinping is to maintain the authority of the Party Central Committee and its centralized, unified leadership; to maintain the authority of the CCP Central Committee and its centralized, unified leadership means, at its foundation, to maintain the core position of General Secretary Xi Jinping.²²

Tianjin Municipal party secretary Li Hongzhong spoke to cadres at a municipal Party Committee work meeting in October 2016, where he declared, “[all cadres] must be highly aligned with the Party Center and with Xi Jinping as the General Secretary If the loyalty is not absolute, it is [equivalent to] absolute disloyalty.”²³ Xi has thus attempted to transmogrify himself into the very embodiment of the party, sending a message that any future without him (or his direct blessing) would put the CCP itself at risk of instability.

Four Possible Scenarios

Xi's consolidation of power and the absence of any designated successor, combined with the dismantling of China's existing — if weak — term limits on executive power, have profound implications for China's future trajectory. The number of variables, not to mention the sheer opacity of China's political system, significantly complicates speculation on when the “post-Xi” era will begin and what it will look like. Will he retire at the upcoming 20th Party Congress in 2022, or will he cling to power for life? If he dies suddenly in office, as Stalin did in 1953, how would the succession process unfold? Would external observers be able to pick up on signs that discord was emerging?

Both Xi Jinping and the CCP have remained silent about the possibility of a leadership change at the upcoming 20th Party Congress, which is now less than two years away. While some CCP-controlled media have declared that Xi has no intention to rule for life, there is a conspicuous absence of official commentary about his political future.²⁴ In order to help contemplate China's succession futures and impacts, this study outlines four possible scenarios.

The intent of outlining the four scenarios below is not to predict the future or even to adjudicate on which scenarios are more or less likely. The number of variables that might affect the probability of a given outcome are innumerable, as are the factors that would shape how these scenarios play out in reality. Rather, the below analysis is designed to provoke discussion about what's *possible*, given that Xi is leading China's political system — and all countries that have a stake in China's future trajectory — into uncharted territory.

Scenario One: Orderly Transition in 2022

In this scenario, Xi thwarts the current consensus by handing over his leadership positions to at least one individual from the current Politburo Standing Committee (as per existing regulations). For this scenario to be considered a bona fide succession, at least two of the three most senior titles would likely be transferred: that of CCP general secretary and that of CMC chairman. Here, instead of completely upending the political consensus of the post-Mao era, Xi abides by the two norms that evolved in the post-Mao era: that the general secretary steps down after two full five-year terms, and that the informal retirement age be 68, a norm that has held since 2002.

Why might Xi elect to officially retire next fall at the 20th Party Congress? There are several plausible reasons.

First, although Xi's two terms in office have been marked by the erosion of norms and regulations governing succession, Xi has also spent a significant amount of time focused on strengthening the organisational and institutional underpinnings of the party-state. While these two developments might seem in tension, Xi may believe that he needed to amass significant political and administrative power in order to press forward on restructuring the party. Now that many of his reforms have been implemented, he may feel comfortable relinquishing his formal leadership positions.

Second, recent academic research on authoritarian systems points to a more visceral reason Xi might feel compelled to step down: personal safety. Predictable succession timelines give regime insiders clarity on when they can expect to be promoted. When their prospects become muddled, rivals might calculate that the only way to clear their own path to power is through a leadership challenge or coup. Possibly sensing that an all-out power grab might incite a coordinated revolt by regime insiders, Xi could instead opt for early retirement. This logic is borne out by research by Erica Frantz and Elizabeth Stein, which concludes:

. . . succession rules . . . protect dictators from coup attempts because they reduce elites' incentives to try to grab power pre-emptively via forceful means. By assuaging the ambition of some elites who have more to gain with patience than with plotting, institutionalized succession rules hamper coordination efforts among coup plotters, which ultimately reduce a leader's risk of confronting coups.²⁵

But of course, there is a paradox in this scenario: for Xi to feel he can retire, he would need a chosen successor who can guarantee his safety, and of course if he can choose his successor, then he is arguably powerful enough to defer retirement.

That being said, assuming Xi does step down, who might succeed him? One challenge in answering this question is that no current Politburo Standing Committee member has a broad enough governing portfolio, nor a sufficient reach and depth of experience throughout the party-military-state, to be seen as a credible replacement. Xi, like Hu Jintao before him, spent the better part of a decade being groomed for higher office in successively more senior positions and across different policy portfolios and geographic regions. This not only acclimates the candidate to governing cultures and processes but also allows them to build credibility within the various bureaucracies.

Given the extent of Xi's extensive purges and his ongoing anti-corruption campaign, whomever Xi selects as his replacement must be steadfastly and publicly loyal. Only with such reassurances will Xi feel that he, and his family and associates, will be safe in retirement. Xi's anti-corruption

campaign has bequeathed him hundreds of powerful enemies and left him with no easy off-ramp from the leadership. It is inconceivable that he would hand over power to someone without a track record of clear and credible loyalty. On this front, few can match Standing Committee member Wang Huning. Wang both shares Xi's deep concern for strengthening party-state governance capacities and is Xi's constant companion on almost all domestic travel, rivaled only by Xi's chief of staff Ding Xuexiang. Wang, however, is a poor candidate for the position of party secretary, as he has no management or governing experience to speak of. Another possible candidate, Premier Li Keqiang, will be 67 by the time of the 20th Party Congress, which means he is not technically disqualified by virtue of his age, but he lacks standing with the military and state security and has been given no leeway by Xi in recent years to develop these connections.

There is one important caveat to the above scenario: even if Xi were to designate a successor and hand over all three leadership positions, it is all but certain that he will continue to rule informally, much like Deng Xiaoping did after he resigned from his final formal title in the wake of the 1989 crackdown. Without resorting to pop psychology, there is nothing in Xi's current leadership style that indicates he will quietly retire, even if he slips out of public view. Having Xi rule informally would have the practical impact of adding uncertainty into the governance policymaking process. Deputies and subordinates would need to navigate the uncertain territory of following the instructions of the *de jure* leader, Xi's successor, and the commands of the informal one, Xi himself.

Scenario Two: Xi Prepares a Succession Plan to Retire at 21st Party Congress in 2027 or the 22nd Party Congress in 2032

Xi Jinping is clearly aware of the importance of a well-functioning leadership succession process. At the 2014 National People's Congress, he declared, "The best way to evaluate whether a country's political system is democratic and efficient is to observe whether the succession of its leaders is orderly and in line."²⁶ Assuming this sentiment is sincere, a delay in retirement in 2022 might not signal the *complete* breakdown of Deng-era efforts to normalise succession. Rather, Xi may have decided to delay retirement until he feels both that he can safely retire and that his ambitious domestic and international legacy will be preserved by his chosen successor. Xi might also believe that 2022 is too early to hand over power, especially to an individual who has not had time to prepare for higher office, as discussed in the previous scenario. It is worth noting that all of the current members of the Politburo Standing Committee (Xi aside) would be past retirement age by 2027, so any potential successor would almost certainly have to be appointed to the leadership's inner sanctum at the 20th Party Congress in 2022 and be under 63 years of age.

The question of how to ensure a safe and prosperous political afterlife ranks high on the list of concerns for any autocratic leader.²⁷ In most modern democracies, outgoing leaders are generally confident that once out of power, they will remain at liberty and largely free to engage (or not) in political life as they see fit.²⁸ Authoritarian leaders, by contrast, have no such security and must do deals both to protect their own safety, their family's safety, and their financial assets once they step down. For example, late last year, the Russian Duma began considering a bill that would grant immunity for former presidents and their families, a clear sign that Vladimir Putin considers his liberty to be at risk once he retires. As research by Alexandre Debs and H.E. Goemans finds, 41 percent of autocrats experience either exile, imprisonment, or death within one year of leaving office, compared to 7 percent for democratic leaders.

The authors conclude, “nondemocratic leaders . . . can and indeed do anticipate significant punishment when they lose office.”²⁹ In the case of Mikhail Gorbachev, the exception proves the rule. As a Russian paper quipped on the occasion of the former Soviet leader’s 90th birthday in March 2021: “He’s the first leader in Russia’s thousand-year history who voluntarily stepped down, stayed alive and at liberty.”³⁰

In China, for example, all of Mao’s potential successors died or were brutally ousted. Deng’s two handpicked successors were both toppled and removed from public life, with one spending decades under house arrest. By contrast, the Chinese leaders who relinquished power voluntarily, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, have enjoyed a safe retirement and have kept their immediate families out of jail. Indeed, this is why the norm on term limits was widely considered to have become entrenched, and indeed institutionalised – it had worked so well in keeping the system stable while the economy grew. Political stability and economic growth seemed to reinforce each other.

What, then, could give Xi the confidence to proceed with retirement in 2027 or 2032?

One possible path is for Xi to remain on as PRC president, thus giving him one important *de jure* title from which he can maintain an element of control and oversight. Granted, the office of the presidency comes with little actual power when compared with the title of CCP general secretary or CMC chairperson. Yet President Xi would keep some control over personnel appointments and officially represent China on state visits. In effect, he would retain a public role as the diplomatic face of China, even if a great deal of power has been shifted to his successor. Alternatively, he could keep his position as head of the CMC, a position much more powerful than that of president, albeit without the same ceremonial role or visibility. As mentioned, Jiang Zemin kept this position in 2002, in a power play which trimmed the power of his successor, Hu Jintao.

Xi could spend the period between 2022 and 2027 (or 2032) promoting a more thoroughgoing anti-corruption campaign to fully and finally clean house of any actual or would-be political opponents, using their dismissal as an opportunity to install an entire generation’s worth of cadres loyal to him. While this would not completely remove the possibility of a post-retirement purge, it would mitigate it to a significant degree and allow Xi to “rule from behind,” much as Deng Xiaoping played kingmaker after he gave up his final remaining leadership title in 1989.

As discussed above, while Xi has already built a small-scale cult of personality, this could reach new heights after the 20th Party Congress, as he looks to elevate his status within the CCP’s political and organisational DNA to become on par with Mao. As Yale University’s Milan Svoblik writes, “Under established autocracy, the dictator’s outward appearance of invincibility is as important as his actual power.”³¹ While such facades of power can and do collapse, Xi can increase the cost of a potential leadership challenge by imprinting his name and persona throughout the party’s ideological and organisational structure.³² Just as Xi has insisted on protecting the legacy of Mao Zedong, his successors might be bound to him, lest they unravel the foundations of the CCP’s power.

But even assuming Xi does retire in 2027 or 2032 – in part or in full – it stands to reason that he would continue to exercise enormous power, as did Deng Xiaoping after 1989. The record of once all-powerful leaders voluntarily and fully relinquishing power, formally or informally, is not robust. Rarely do leaders willingly abdicate, and when they do, they often play the role of informal kingmaker.

Scenario Three: Leadership Challenge or Coup

Plots to overthrow Xi and his administration are not the product of fevered imaginations but rather have been widely spoken of by senior Chinese officials, including Xi Jinping himself. Many date back to the early months of 2012, underlining Xi's belief that rivals wanted to prevent him from taking over leadership of the CCP later that year. Others are vague and amorphous accusations of unnamed "plots" by anonymous "traitors" that are likely levelled to justify Xi's shakeup of the party bureaucracy and his wide-reaching intra-party discipline campaigns. In an internal speech published in 2016, Xi spoke of "political plot activities" designed to "wreck and split the Party."³³ That same year, the then-head of the China Securities Regulatory Commission, Liu Shiyu, accused disgraced officials, including Sun Zhengcai and Zhou Yongkang, of "[plotting] to usurp the party's leadership and seize state power."³⁴ Vice President Wang Qishan echoed Liu's remarks, warning that "some [senior officials] even sought to . . . seize party and state power."³⁵

Of course, fears of political plots and coups are the norm for most authoritarian leaders, just as worries over election challenges are the natural and inevitable concern of politicians in democratic systems. According to Milan Svobik's research, "an overwhelming majority of dictators lose power to those inside the gates of the presidential palace rather than to the masses. The predominant political conflict in dictatorships appears to be not between the ruling elite and the masses but rather one *among* regime insiders."³⁶ While coups in one-party communist regimes are infrequent, the fate of authoritarian leaders who are overthrown are grim, with 73 per cent of defeated leaders facing death, imprisonment, or exile.³⁷



Chinese People's Liberation Army navy soldiers of a guard of honor look at Chinese President Xi Jinping (Front) during a welcoming ceremony for King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain outside the Great Hall of People on September 16, 2013 in Beijing, China.

Source: Feng Li/Getty Images

While Xi's consolidation of power is impressive, even the most powerful of leaders retain office owing to the support of a coalition of actors and interests. Their backing of a given leader is conditional and based on shifting domestic and international variables. While the precise bargain between Xi and members of the political, economic, or military elite are unknown, a dramatic economic slowdown or the repeated mishandling of international crises would likely make Xi's job of managing his ruling coalition more difficult and tenuous. In short: every coalition has a breaking point. This, of course, is why attempted coups are dealt with so severely, so as to disincentivise future would-be challengers. As Gambian president Yahya Jammeh warned after a failed coup attempt in 2014: "Anybody who plans to attack this country, be ready, because you are going to die."³⁸

That being said, successfully organising a coup against an incumbent leader — especially one in a Leninist one-party state—is a daunting challenge.³⁹ A would-be coup leader faces numerous barriers, beginning with gathering support from key members of the military-security bureaucracy without alerting the incumbent leader and their security apparatus. The chances of a coup being mounted against Xi at the moment, absent a systemic crisis, are exceedingly small. Given the technological capabilities of the CCP security services, which Xi controls, such an endeavour is fraught with the risk of detection and the possible defection from early plotters who change their mind. It is true that Xi has a host of enemies in the party. It is equally true that the barriers to organising against him are near insurmountable.

Yale University political scientist Dan Mattingly points to another important reality: Chinese leaders are well aware of possible coup threats and thus take explicit actions to mitigate any such efforts. Utilising a data set of more than 10 000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) appointments, Mattingly finds that Xi has overseen personnel rotations within China's military that favour "high-level command positions officers whose ethnic, class, and ideological backgrounds make them unlikely to back anti-regime protesters."⁴⁰ Given that the military would play an outsized role in any planned coup, Xi's ability to move lower officials into senior military leadership positions would go a long way to stopping a coup attempt before it could even begin.

While the precise bargain between Xi and members of the political, economic, or military elite are unknown, a dramatic economic slowdown or the repeated mishandling of international crises would likely make Xi's job of managing his ruling coalition more difficult and tenuous.

A conventional leadership challenge, which would proceed according to a more formal legalistic process, shares some of the inherent collective action challenges that makes organising a coup so difficult. Xi's increasing grip over domestic security services means that the communication between would-be challengers necessary for arranging logistical details would be next to impossible. Despite their enormous power, senior members of the CCP and the PLA lack the basic ability to move about and communicate unnoticed by Xi's all-seeing security apparatus.

A challenge could occur seemingly spontaneously at a formal convening of the Politburo or the full Central Committee, but that would require several officials to trigger a cascade of disapproval of Xi's leadership. This option similarly suffers from the basic fact that until a colleague raises their hand to register their dissent, it is impossible to know how many are willing to join the effort to unseat Xi.

Scenario Four: Unexpected Death or Incapacitation

“No one dared bid him prepare for death; none dared to try on the crown in his presence.”

— Bertram Wolfe, *The Struggle for Soviet Succession*, 1953

Even if the CCP's claim that Xi Jinping has no designs to remain in office for life is true, his evisceration of succession norms leaves the country ill-prepared for his sudden death or incapacitation. Xi Jinping is 67 years old, has been a smoker, is overweight, has a high-stress job, and, according to state media, “finds joy in exhaustion.”⁴¹ It is true that Xi could effectively govern for some years yet. By 2035, the year by which a number of his signature programs are due to be completed, he will be 82, about the same age as Joe Biden at the end of his first term in the White House.⁴² Still, it not surprising that rumours about Xi's ill health have swirled for several years, sparked by video footage appearing to show his unsteady gait while meeting foreign leaders.⁴³

While much about his health is unknown, any severe or terminal illness would initially be treated as a state secret, although such efforts have a limited shelf life given the visibility and demands of a modern leader as opposed to, say, Mao Zedong or Franklin D Roosevelt. Nonetheless, the authorities tightly control reporting about Xi's health within China, and they have threatened foreign journalists who write about the issue with the cancellation of their visas.⁴⁴ For Xi, projecting vim and vigour is important, as much to keep any potential political challengers at bay as anything else.⁴⁵ During the 1991 “August Coup” against Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, coup plotters made a public announcement over state radio that Gorbachev was “unable to perform his presidential duty for health reasons,” an accusation that Gorbachev would later describe as a “monstrous deception.”⁴⁶ In the end, of course, the coup failed, but the connection between an autocrat's health and his political security are well established.

Owing to the lack of detail on Xi's health, this report will refrain from speculating on any likely cause of death or incapacitation. Likewise, the exact circumstances of a sudden health event, including Xi's geographic location when he takes ill or dies, are too numerous to consider. For the sake of simplicity, this paper will assume that Xi's death is sudden and unexpected.

What steps would be taken once Xi's death has occurred, or is imminent? On paper, at least, the process is straightforward. According to the CCP constitution, the general secretary can only be “elected” during a plenary session of the Central Committee. An incoming general secretary can further only be selected from the current composition of the Politburo Standing Committee. Similarly, the constitution simply states, “Members of the Central Military Commission of the Party are decided on by the Central Committee.” For the office of the presidency, the PRC constitution stipulates that the president and vice president are “elected by the National People's Congress.”

Thus, assuming the process and institutions work according to plan, in the event of Xi's death, the full CCP Central Committee would be summoned to decide who, among the remaining members of the Politburo Standing Committee, should be elevated to take Xi's position as general secretary and CMC

chairman. It is unclear if the National People's Congress would need to convene to formalise the elevation of the vice president, as per the PRC constitution, or if the power would automatically be transferred once the leader's death was certified.

These few sentences in the PRC and CCP constitutions, however, are almost certainly inadequate to describe what would happen in reality. In practice, the choice of a new leader would be decided through a process of informal consultation and horse trading, before being approved by the Central Committee. As discussed above, Xi's tenure in office has been enabled by a relatively coherent and stable group of governing and supporting elites who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo once he passes away. While Xi's anti-corruption campaign has swept aside hundreds of senior officials and generals, the stability at the top of Xi's government has been striking. His chief ideologue and top economic adviser, Wang Huning and Liu He, respectively, have served throughout his time in office, as have his two top foreign policy officials, Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi. Additionally, the organisational apparatus of the CCP has the ability to act as a buffer against instability, with (albeit imperfect) internal mechanisms and procedures in place for managing some of the immediate post-Xi volatility.

In a power vacuum, however, the process could break down into infighting within the Politburo, a nightmare scenario for CCP institutionalists. Members of Xi's coalition might splinter into different groups backing disparate successors. Those who had been punished or marginalised by Xi's coalition may rightly see his death as a rare opportunity to reassert power, and thus they too could be vying for control.

As it is impossible to predict how the process would unfold – largely because it is unknown when such an event might occur or under what circumstances – a more practicable undertaking for outside observers would be to ask: what are externally-observable signs of a succession process going smoothly, and what are signs of an emergent leadership split? Signs of irregularity might include:

- The absence of the premier or the vice president from regularly scheduled meetings;
- Changes to the scheduling of state-run TV news broadcasts, radio programs, and the morning editions of the major national and metropolitan newspapers;
- Sudden internet outages and disruptions to social media; owing to its popularity, WeChat in particular might experience “technical difficulties” or, conversely, be an important channel for the opposition if a power struggle breaks out;
- Inexplicable disruptions of flight and rail schedules at major Chinese airports and train stations; and
- Competing or contrasting narratives emerging from various organs of the central government, in the official media, or on the internet, without being taken down.

There is another important scenario to consider: that of Xi's health-related incapacitation (e.g., stroke, heart attack). Unlike a leader's death, incapacitation forces the system into a political purgatory of indeterminate length, wherein regime supporters and detractors alike try to simultaneously hedge between recovery and expiry.

In the case of Stalin, it took nearly five full days for him to finally succumb to the debilitating stroke he suffered on 1 March 1953. In the intervening days, various groupings of high-ranking Soviet officials plotted against one another as they began to contemplate a possible post-Stalin era. As Khrushchev later recalled, Lavrentiy Beria, the feared head of the secret police, cursed Stalin as his condition worsened, but when signs of recovery emerged, “Beria threw himself on his knees, seized Stalin's hand,

and started kissing it.”⁴⁷ It is worth remembering that the recent comedy movie inspired by the former Soviet leader’s passing, *The Death of Stalin*, was only funny because the actual events surrounding his death were so farcical.⁴⁸

But what would happen if Xi died “in instalments,” as someone remarked about Stalin, and was incapacitated while in office? According to the PRC constitution, the vice president can assume the powers of the president “when so entrusted by the president.” Obviously, this creates a dilemma if the president is suddenly stricken and unable to give assent to such a move. Nonetheless, at least for the office of the presidency, it can be assumed that the vice president would be the natural choice to temporarily assume these powers. Similarly, Article 84 of the constitution stipulates, “In the event that the office of president of the People’s Republic of China becomes vacant the vice president shall succeed to the office of president.”

But there are, of course, degrees of incapacitation. While Stalin took only a few days to die, Leonid Brezhnev atrophied for years before passing away, dragging down the capacity of the government along with his health. The same applies to Mao Zedong, who was seriously ill for years before his death. In the case of a lengthy illness in China, the problem is what constitutes the presidency being “vacant.” Does this only pertain to a full and final departure from office? Or would a temporary incapacitation render the president “vacant” from their office? Furthermore, China currently has one vice president, Wang Qishan, a former Xi confidant who is 72 and should no longer be serving in high office because he has passed the formal retirement age. Entrusting the presidency to him in the event of Xi’s inability to fulfil his duties may itself pose challenges.

And what of the more consequential offices of general secretary and CMC chairperson? Here there is far less certainty, as there exist no publicly available procedures or legal authority governing how such a situation would be treated. Even more than an untimely death, incapacitation – in the absence of a clear and empowered successor – would be dangerous, as it would slowly unravel the status quo and allow for new factional jostling, alignments, and splits. Top party leaders who owe their positions directly to Xi, such as Cai Qi, currently the top party official in Beijing, would be vulnerable. This was a problem for both Hua Guofeng and Jiang Qing (“Madame Mao”) who, outside of their connection to Mao Zedong, had no independent base of support in the party or the military. Without Mao, they were exposed. At the same time, the positions within the CCP hierarchy that hold enormous power, such as head of the party’s personnel and anti-corruption departments, could come into play. Without an active CMC chair, the military itself could take on a more independent political role. In the case of Mao, the Central Bodyguard Bureau was pivotal in throwing their weight behind the reformist faction and helping arrest Jiang Qing and the three other members of the “Gang of Four.” It is hard to imagine such drama inside the walls of Zhongnanhai in the twenty-first century, but likewise, there is no road map for the ruling party should Xi fall seriously ill.

Conclusion

The four scenarios above are not offered as a precise or exhaustive blueprint of China's future. Multiple additional scenarios are possible, including Xi's retirement in 2035, the mid-way point between the two "hundred-year goals." Instead, this study's aim is to publicly raise genuine problems in China's political trajectory under Xi Jinping, most notably the country's ability to transfer power in a peaceful and predictable manner. For decades after Mao's death in 1976, the country's political system seemed increasingly stable, the occasional outbreak of top-level turmoil notwithstanding. Today, however, China's political path is shrouded in great uncertainty. While the topic of leadership succession is not something Chinese officials are willing to discuss in public, the world has a huge stake in how China addresses this emerging problem.

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