

Xi Jinping 习近平

Born 1953



Current Positions

- President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (2013–present)
- General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (2012–present)
- Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) (2012–present)
- Member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) (2007–present)
- Chairman of the National Security Committee (2013–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms (2013–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Foreign Affairs and National Security (2013–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs (2012–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Financial and Economic Work (2013–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Network Security and Information Technology (2014–present)
- Head of the CMC Central Leading Group for Deepening Reforms of National Defense and the Military (2014–present)
- Commander in Chief of the Joint Operations Command Center of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) (2016–present)
- Chairman of the Central Military and Civilian Integration Development Committee (2017–present)
- Member of the Politburo (2007–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (2002–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Xi Jinping was born on June 15, 1953, in Beijing. His ancestral home is Fuping County, Shaanxi Province. Xi was a “sent-down youth” at an agricultural commune in Yanchuan County, Shaanxi (1969–75).¹ He joined the CCP in 1974. Xi received his undergraduate education in chemical engineering from Tsinghua University in Beijing (1975–79) and later graduated with a doctoral degree in law (Marxism) from the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tsinghua University (via part-time studies, 1998–2002).

Early in his career (1979–82), Xi served as a personal secretary (*mishu*) to Geng Biao, then minister of defense. Subsequently, Xi served as deputy secretary and then secretary of Zhengding County, Hebei Province (1982–85), and thereafter in Fujian Province as executive vice-mayor of Xiamen City (1985–88), party secretary of Ningde County (1988–90), party secretary of Fuzhou City (1990–96), deputy party secretary of Fujian Province (1996–99), governor of Fujian Province (1999–2002). After his time in Fujian, Xi served as governor of Zhejiang Province (2002) and party secretary of Zhejiang Province (2002–07). In March 2007, Xi was appointed party secretary of Shanghai. Seven months later, he was transferred to Beijing to serve as a Politburo Standing Committee member (2007–present) and executive secretary of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee (2007–12). In March 2008, he was elected PRC vice-president (2008–13). Xi was in charge of preparations for both the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and the 2009 celebrations commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. He also served as president of the Central Party School (2007–12), the most important venue for training officials and ideological/policy research in the CCP. Xi was reelected as general secretary of the CCP and chairman of the CMC at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, and then as president of the PRC at the 13th National People's Congress in March 2018. He was first elected to the Central Committee as an alternate member at the 15th Party Congress in 1997.

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Xi is a princeling; he is the son of Xi Zhongxun, a former Politburo member and vice-premier who was one of the architects of China's Special Economic Zones in the early 1980s.² Xi Jinping is widely considered to be a protégé of both former PRC president Jiang Zemin and former PRC vice-president Zeng Qinghong. Xi's first marriage produced no children. His ex-wife, Ke Lingling, is the daughter of Ke Hua, former PRC ambassador to the United Kingdom, where Ke Lingling now lives. Xi's current wife, Peng Liyuan, is from his second marriage. Peng is a famous Chinese folksinger who, until recently, served in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) at the rank of major general. She served as president of the PLA General Political Department Song and Dance Troupe and president of the PLA Art Institute. Their only daughter, Xi Mingze, received her undergraduate degree in psychology from Harvard University (2010–14) and later pursued a graduate program in the same field at a university in Beijing.

Policy Preferences and Political Prospects

Over the course of his first term, Xi has proven himself to be China's strongest leader since Deng Xiaoping. Of the many noteworthy developments from this period, the following three efforts stand out: Anti-Graft Campaign – With the support of his principal political ally in the PSC, “anticorruption czar” Wang Qishan, Xi launched a remarkably bold national anti-graft campaign. The campaign has resulted in the purges of not only retired heavyweight leaders such as former PSC member Zhou Yongkang, but also about 11 percent of the members of the 18th Central Committee, including Politburo member Sun Zhengcai. To some extent, the overriding objective of his anti-corruption campaign has been to restore the Chinese public's faith in its ruling party, which lost public trust in the wake of the Bo Xilai scandal and the Ling Jihua incident.³

Military Reform – Xi achieved a milestone victory in restructuring the PLA, through efforts which have been officially referred to as “military reform” (军队改革). Reform efforts have centered on marginalizing the four PLA general departments that had undermined the authority of the civilian-led CMC; transforming China's military operations from a Russian-style, army-centric system toward what analysts call a “Western-style joint command” system; and swiftly promoting “young guards” to top positions in the officer corps. Of the 66 military members of the 19th Central Committee, 60 (91 percent) were newcomers.⁴

Proactive Foreign Policy – Xi's “proactive” (奋发有为) approach to foreign policy marks a significant departure from Deng Xiaoping's strategy of “keeping a low profile” (韬光养晦). Xi's efforts have sought to showcase China's rapid rise on the world stage under his leadership, including through the launch of the “Belt and Road Initiative” and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and China's deepening engagement in international institutions and forums, most notably his speech at the Davos World Economic Forum in 2017. His efforts have also included concerted attempts to seek a “new model of great power relations” with the United States.

On other policy issues, however, Xi has exhibited paradoxical preferences and tendencies. For example, the objective of his economic policy, as articulated at the third plenum of the 18th Central Committee in 2013, has been to make the private sector the decisive driver of the Chinese economy. Yet, Xi continues to favor China's industrial policy and has called for making flagship state-owned enterprises “bigger and stronger.”

His attitude toward public intellectuals has proven similarly ambivalent. On the one hand, Xi has promoted Chinese think tanks, which are mostly staffed with academics. On the other, his politically conservative approach to governance—in particular, his reliance on ideological oversight and media censorship—has left him at loggerheads with many of the country's intellectuals. A similar tension

exists in Xi's approach to legal reforms. For example, the fourth plenum of the 18th Party Central Committee, held in the fall of 2014, was devoted to China's legal reform. This marked the first time in CCP history that a plenum concentrated on law. Further, Xi's work report at the 19th Party Congress established the Central Leading Group of Rule of Law in the party and a constitutional review system in the state. It seems that Xi, more than any previous top leader, is interested in having his legacy centered on the development of rule of law and the judiciary in China. Yet, critics often point to the arrests and harassment of human rights lawyers in China as examples that the rule of law in China has actually regressed under Xi's leadership.

Some of this cognitive dissonance may be temporary compromises as Xi positions himself to gain broad support from various forces in the country. If Xi aspires to be a truly great and transformative Chinese leader, he must eventually present a clear and coherent vision for the country while also respecting the political rules and norms that have laid the groundwork for China's economic and political rise.

The recent NPC meeting has proposed removing a clause from the country's constitution—added during the Deng Xiaoping era—which limits both the presidency and vice presidency to two five-year terms. Undoing this restriction essentially lines Xi up to be “President for Life.” It appears that Xi has seized upon his moment at the pinnacle of accrued political capital to avoid becoming a lame duck and to cement his hold over the country for as long as he desires.

This latest action by Xi alienates two critical constituencies, whose power Xi may be underestimating. Intellectuals will be among the first to push back and shape the public discourse. They have been disillusioned by Xi's leadership since 2013, when authorities began cracking down on open discussion of “seven subversive currents,” including universal values, constitutional democracy, human rights, civil society, and media freedom. Their perceptions of Xi as a Mao-like figure may now be crystallized.

The political establishment, while certainly composed of some “yes-men” willing to do the president's bidding, is by no means monolithic. Some political elites may stand up for their belief in the institutionalized norms of the Deng era. Others may see Xi's reversal of constitutional constraints on term limits as heralding a return to an era of vicious power struggles—a zero-sum game in which they will also ruthlessly engage in the years to come.

Compiled by Cheng Li and the staff of the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings

Notes:

¹ “Sent-down youth” (插队知青) refers to young, educated urbanites who left their home cities to serve as manual laborers in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

² For more information on Xi's family background and his early life experiences, see Liang Jian 梁剑, *New Biography of Xi Jinping* [习近平新传] (New York: Mirror Books, 2012), and Wu Ming 吴鸣, *Biography of Xi Jinping* [习近平传] (Hong Kong: 文化艺术出版社, 2008).

³ For a detailed discussion of these cases, see Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2016), pp. 1–5, 23–24.

⁴ This includes four military alternate members of the 18th Central Committee who were promoted to be full members of the 19th Central Committee. If these four leaders are excluded, 85 percent would be newcomers.