A Setback or Boost for Xi Jinping’s Concentration of Power? 
Domination versus Resistance within the CCP Elite

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Xi Jinping’s concentration of power, which had already achieved remarkable success, was further endorsed and institutionalized during the October 2017 Nineteenth Party Congress and the March 2018 session of the National People’s Congress. In recent Chinese political developments, is it possible to detect elite resistance to Xi’s fast-growing power and authority? How are party-state cadres able to display such resistance? Furthermore, how does such resistance affect Xi’s power and governance? This article attempts to answer these questions by, first, looking at how Xi has promoted his concentration of power in the aftermath of the Nineteenth Party Congress; second, discussing four aspects of such elite resistance, and; third, analyzing how Xi has reacted under the new sociopolitical circumstances to elite resistance. It is argued that elite resistance does exist and recently it has been furthered by social and international factors. However, Xi has taken additional steps to strengthen his personal dictatorship over party-state elites. Such a struggle between the dictator and the bureaucrats will continue to shape the dynamics of China’s politics and policy.

When Xinhua, China’s official news agency, on July 11, 2018 reposted an old article criticizing the personality cult of Hua Guofeng, China’s interim leader after Mao Zedong, it caused speculation that the real target was the current leader Xi Jinping. Coincidently or not, Xi Jinping’s name disappeared from the front-page titles of articles in Renmin ribao (People’s Daily), the central organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), on July 9, and then again on July 15 and 18, immediately stirring a wave of whispers, especially in Chinese social media WeChat (微信), that Xi was in a big trouble. Different versions of the so-called “July coup d’état” began to spread, all pointing to a political setback for Xi Jinping.

Is there effective resistance from party-state elites to Xi Jinping’s authority and power? What impact might it have on Chinese politics in general and on Xi’s ambitious concentration of power and personality cult in particular? This article attempts to answer these questions in hopes of contributing to an understanding of the dynamics of elite politics in Xi Jinping’s China. It will first look at how Xi has promoted a concentration of power, then it will discuss how CCP elites have promoted resistance, and, finally, it will return to an analysis of how Xi has counterattacked in the new sociopolitical circumstances. It argues that elite resistance does indeed exist, and it has recently been emboldened by social and international factors, but Xi has taken further steps to strengthen his personal dictatorship over party-state elites. In the long term, such battle between the dictator and the bureaucrats will continue to shape the dynamics of China’s political development.

Xi’s Continuous Concentration of Power and the Reemergence of a Personality Cult
During his first five years in office, he achieved remarkable successes, which were very much endorsed and institutionalized by the Nineteenth National CCP Congress, held in October 2017, and the session of the National People’s Congress (NPC) in March 2018. His continuous push for a further concentration of power has continued to escalate since the spring of 2018, which can be observed in three areas, namely, formal institutional operations, informal politics, and the rise of his personality cult.

In terms of formal institutional operations, Xi now holds many official positions in the party-state system—not only the “holy trinity” consisting of party general secretary, state president, and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) but also as head of a number of significant central committee or central commission decision-making bodies, including, but not limited to, those listed below:\(^2\)

- the Central Committee for Deepening Overall Reform (中央全面深化改革委员会)\(^3\)
- the Central Financial Economic Affairs Commission (中央财经委员会)\(^4\)
- the Central Auditing Committee (中央审计委员会)\(^5\)
- the Commission for Law-based Governance of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (中央全面依法治国委员会)\(^6\)
- the National Security Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (中央国家安全委员会)\(^7\)
- the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (中央外事委员会)\(^8\)
- the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (中央网络安全和信息化委员会)\(^9\)

Many of these committees/commissions have been upgraded from the “leading small groups” (领导小组) that existed prior to the Nineteenth Party Congress. However, although various “central leading small groups” still exist and function within the party-state system, including at the national level, they are now differentiated from the newly established or restructured central committees/commissions. The central committees/commissions are more formal, prestigious, and powerful than their predecessors, and the latter have been downgraded to task forces within the top leadership. This new development is an indication of Xi’s concentration of power following the Nineteenth Party Congress.\(^10\)

Immediately prior to and following the Nineteenth Party Congress, a series of new institutional measures came into being to increase Xi’s power over his comrades in the top leadership, the following two of which deserve special attention:

- the CMC chairman responsibility system (军委主席负责制)\(^11\)
- the annual review of the work of each Politburo member by the party center and by General Secretary Xi Jinping (中央政治局成员向党中央和习近平总书记述职)\(^12\)

For the first time in CCP history, the Nineteenth Party Congress included the CMC chairman responsibility system in the party charter,\(^13\) after which the entire People’s Liberation Army (PLA) began to study it.\(^14\) With this charter amendment, the CMC no longer follows the CCP’s organizational principle whereby a party committee is a collective in which, according to Mao
Zedong’s explicit elaboration, members are equal to one another as the secretary (or in this case the chairman) is only the monitor (班长). Instead, the CMC chairman has now become a figure like *Der Führer*, who stands well above the most prestigious military generals who sit on the commission, and these generals as CMC members are personally accountable to the CMC chairman.

Similarly, the new review measure for Politburo members, which requires that they each submit a written annual report about his/her work to the general secretary for review, changes the comradely relationship between Politburo members and the party chief into a somewhat institutionalized hierarchy, and the accountability of Politburo members is now directed to the general secretary rather than to the Central Committee that nominally elects the Politburo. Although in principle the report is also directed to the party center, which can be understood as a reference to the Central Committee, the relevant official news report does not explain how the Central Committee is involved in such reviews. In contrast, the announcement of this annual report highlights how Xi Jinping meticulously reviews the reports by the Politburo members. It is obvious that Xi is acting on behalf of the party center to review the work of the Politburo members.

Authoritarianism is often featured by a prevalence of informal over formal politics. The informal politics of the CCP leadership allows more space, convenience, and facilities for the paramount leader to concentrate his power than that provided by the formal institutions. In post–Nineteenth Party Congress China, the absence of a designated successor to Xi is the primary informal political factor that comprehensively strengthens Xi’s hold on power. First, it rules out the possibility that in the second term Xi will become a lame duck. Second, and more importantly, because a successor has not been designated before the convening of the next party congress, it strongly suggests that Xi’s top leadership position will continue well beyond 2022. This became abundantly clear when, in March 2018, the NPC amended the PRC Constitution to eliminate the term limit for state president, a position concurrently held by General Secretary Xi. Although this is a formal, constitutional measure, the arrangement that the CCP party chief concurrently holds the position of state president has never been stipulated in any formal constitutional document. The amendment, therefore, has not only cleared for this to be a formal institution but also indicates that during his next term Xi will retain all of his current top party, state, and military positions. Accordingly, Xi’s authority has been substantially enhanced among cadres who must seek to establish long-term working relationships under him.

In a deeper sense, the above developments explicitly tell party-state cadres that Xi is able to destroy, or at least to ignore, those leadership norms and customs established during the past decades, and he can do what he wants despite whatever powerful consensus might exist among other top leaders. This amounts to a tacit announcement that the rules of the game have changed, and that it is Xi Jinping who now makes the rules.

The rise of Xi’s personality cult further reinforces the above political signals. As a member of the generation that grew up during Mao’s Cultural Revolution, Xi seems to value his memories of becoming politically educated under the Great Leader, and he retains an admiration for Mao’s success in promoting his own personality cult. It is now Xi’s turn to follow Mao in the regard. The resumption of a personality cult is so widespread that there are countless praises and
celebrations of Xi’s wisdom, insights, abilities, personality, and numerous outstanding qualities in almost all aspects of his life. Below are merely several such examples:

— With “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) written into both the CCP charter and the PRC Constitution, the phrase “the Xi Jinping new era” has frequently appeared in the official media, as exemplified by the title of a front-page People’s Daily column.

— Studies of Xi Jinping Thought have priority in philosophy and social science “academic research.”

— So-called “Liangjiahe magnificent scholarship” (梁家河大学问) is promoted to highlight Xi’s experience as a “sent-down youth” in Liangjiahe, a remote village in Shaanxi province, during his teenage years (1969–75).

— Xi as a moral model, including how to love one’s mother.

— A number of unofficial editions of Quotations from Xi Jinping, including various online editions and collections on specific themes, such as “the mass line” and so forth.

Resistance from Party-State Elites: Who and How?

Is there any resistance to Xi’s concentration of power arising from party-state elites? Because official outlets for political opinion in China are monopolized, or at least tightly controlled, by the CCP in general and often by the top leaders in particular, on the surface it is difficult to find evidence of elite resistance. Scattered and in-between-the-lines information does exist, however, for exploring an answer to this question. Let me present four areas in which we might find some clues.

First, elite discontent has been sporadically expressed in cadres’ speeches, social-media communications, and comments in many other public or semi-public venues. For example, in a public address, Zhang Haishun (张海顺), a bureau director in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, after citing Xi’s 2017 New Year’s remarks that called for “rolling up [one’s] sleeves to work harder,” added the following comment: “holding up [one’s] skirt for fxxking harder” (撩起裙子加油干), which is an obvious play with sexual overtones on Xi’s initial sentence. Zhang Haishun was of course punished by the Party, but his boldness is surprising as Xi’s authority is thought by many unchallengable.

Such resistance did not disappear after the Nineteenth Party Congress. For instance, Zhang Xiaoshan (张晓山) (unrelated to Zhang Haishun), a retired bureau-level cadre in the central government, was denounced by the party’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection for “blatantly calumniating the incumbent party-state leader(s)” on social media. The official statement, according to the report in mass media, surprisingly points to Zhang’s “revolutionary family” background, with parents who were former revolutionaries and who held high-ranking positions after 1949. However, any further information about Zhang’s parents is not disclosed.

This is only the tip of the iceberg, but the existence of such an iceberg is indicated by the widespread circulation of political rumors about Xi, usually through social media, in which party-state cadres also actively participate. This is the second area in which we can observe elite resistance. It can be called, following Yale political scientist James Scott’s suggestion in a different context, “everyday resistance with ‘weapons of the weak.’” The cadres are not
The most threatening challenge to Xi comes from PLA generals. The military is an area to which Xi has paid the most attention since coming to power and in which he has carried out a series of significant measures to establish and enhance his personal control, including a fundamental reorganization of the PLA and a powerful anti-corruption campaign that led to the imprisonment of a number of top PLA leaders. These measures have been partially successful, but they have also stirred up resistance among the generals. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain why top-ranking PLA officers were successively purged after Xi came to power. After two vice chairmen of the Seventeenth CMC, Xu Caihou (徐才厚) and Guo Boxiong (郭伯雄), were purged in 2014 and 2015, respectively, two leading members of the Eighteenth CMC, Fang Fenghui (房峰辉) and Zhang Yang (张阳), were dismissed during the reorganization of the military leadership prior to the Nineteenth Party Congress. It is rumored that they were involved in a failed military coup d’état against Xi; the claim that Zhang Yang committed suicide thereafter adds further mystery to the reason for their purge.

The fourth area is open social criticism of Xi and its connections with regime elites. On July 4, 2018, a young female named Dong Yaoqiong (董瑶琼) broadcast via Twitter that she had splashed ink on the huge portrait of Xi located in front of the HNA (Hainan Airlines) building in Shanghai. It is not clear whether this dramatic action was supported by people within the regime, but there has been speculation that hints at such a connection. Nevertheless, an earlier protest targeting Xi’s personality cult clearly had an elite background. During this event, on the campus of Peking University Fan Liqin (樊立勤) hung a 24-page big-character poster that harshly criticized Xi Jinping by name. Fan’s long-time friendship with Deng Pufang (邓朴方), the eldest son of Deng Xiaoping, was no secret within Beijing political circles; Fan actually announced his ties to Deng when the police came to take him away, probably in an attempt to protect himself from possible violent police action.

Guo Wengui (郭文贵), a business tycoon now living in New York, is probably the most prominent regime-affiliated figure among the various people who have stood up to confront Xi’s policies. The controversies around his “exposure of [the CCP’s] dirty secrets” have been widespread, but, as his critics agree, Guo represents some prominent forces among the CCP elite who have become victims of Xi’s powerful anti-corruption campaign. Guo has repeatedly claimed that he does not oppose Xi, but his criticism of Xi’s policies, Xi’s political allies (such as Wang Qishan [王岐山]), as well as the CCP regime is harsh, heavy, and, perhaps, apocalyptic.

**Xi Fights Back: Old Measures, New Circumstances**

How has such elite resistance unsettled Xi? How did Xi respond to the various expressions of discontent? The simple answer is that Xi chose to fight back, and so far he has gained the upper
Substantial measures have been taken since August 2018 to strengthen Xi’s authority, power, and personality cult. When Xi jumpstarted a new round of power consolidation, he generally followed the familiar path that he had taken since 2012 when he began his successful “long march” as a low-key, simply lucky, successor to the highest-ranking position in the “core” of the Chinese leadership. After August 2018 he kicked off his new battle by enhancing control over the military, the police, and the party propaganda machine—the triple pillars of CCP power, dubbed the “the gun barrel, the knife handle, and the pen-holder.” In late August, successive national meetings were convened. A national conference on propaganda and thought work (全国宣传思想工作会议) was held for the first time since 2013. The Central Commission for Law-based Governance held its first meeting since its establishment in October 2017. The theme of an unprecedented military conference held in August was party building within the military. This implies that it is likely that Xi will assume systematic control over the PLA through party organizations.

Anti-corruption remains Xi’s most powerful weapon to tighten control over the party elite, as has been the case during the past five-plus years. The widespread presence of cadre corruption, together with the absence of legal procedures, provides Xi with much room to arbitrarily choose the targets of his anti-corruption campaign. Thus, the selection of campaign victims can be based on power struggle considerations. After a period of several quiet months in terms of the anti-corruption campaign following the Nineteenth Party Congress, a new high tide emerged in the late summer and fall of 2018. PLA generals took the lead in facing imprisonment; this time Yang Hui (杨晖), a long-time head of military intelligence, and a number of other high-ranking officers were reportedly victims. In late September, two ministerial-level cadres, Nuer Baike (努尔白克力), a former governor of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, and Meng Hongwei (孟宏伟), a deputy minister of Public Security, were taken into custody. Both were politically sensitive cases, as Baikeli was a top Uyghur cadre, and Meng concurrently was president of Interpol. Similar to other military and civilian leaders, they are likely to be charged with bribery or the like, but their involvement in political plots challenging Xi’s power casts long shadows. In fact, they have already been informally accused of being “venomous remnants” (余毒) of Xu Caihou, Guo Boxiong, and Zhou Yongkang (周永康), a legal tsar and a Standing Committee member of the Seventeenth Politburo before his purge in 2013.

These measures indicate that after six years in power Xi Jinping still sees a great necessity to fight enemies within the party and to overcome intra-party elite resistance. Despite his having won a huge success in concentrating his power at the Nineteenth Party Congress, why have further tensions emerged? To this author, two factors have been especially important in shaping the new circumstances under which Xi’s authority has been undermined and elite resistance has gained new momentum. First, there have been growing social tensions fueled by Xi’s actions in his post–Nineteenth Party Congress governance. Such actions include: the constitutional
amendment that eliminates term limits for the PRC president; the crackdown on private business people by depriving them of their personal freedom and property; brutal policies carried out by local leaders who are widely regarded as Xi’s favorites, as exemplified by Beijing’s expulsion of millions of migrant workers and a province-wide campaign in Jiangxi to destroy the coffins of rural residents.\textsuperscript{35} Social disillusionment with Xi resonates with the anti-Xi elite discontent, which has been increasingly encouraged to express itself.

Xi’s social support is now quite different from his social support prior to the Nineteenth Party Congress. During his first term, Xi’s powerful anti-corruption campaign by and large was welcome by ordinary Chinese citizens, who widely celebrated the fall of those powerful, extravagant, and arrogant elite, despite the fact that their punishments were politically selective and not subject to legal procedures. For many reasons, including their daily life experiences and traditional cultural values, Chinese residents are generally inclined to support the dictator in his war against the bureaucrats. This is why Mao is still popular in China today and why his disastrous Cultural Revolution is remembered favorably. When Xi’s authority reaches new heights whereby the goal of the exercise of such power and authority is to victimize ordinary people and to deprive them of their already limited rights, the winds can change abruptly and Xi’s legitimacy to fight against elite resistance may be quickly exhausted.

Foreign policy challenges also matter greatly in terms of undermining Xi’s authority. The giving of vast sums of Chinese money to the Global South countries is harshly criticized among Chinese citizens. Xi’s mismanagement of the trade war with the United States has stirred fears among both elites and ordinary people of a possible economic disaster. This is the second factor that has contributed to anti-Xi dynamics.

Conclusion

A fundamental feature of the Xi Jinping era has been the emergence of tensions between the dictator and the elite, which is distinguished from the post-Tiananmen consensus that allowed elite rent-seeking in pursuit individual interests that resonated with regime interests. Xi’s efforts to concentrate his personal power is one of the primary reasons for the intensification of various contradictions in China in general and in the party-state system in particular. When the enhancement of Xi’s power and personal authority extends to the victimization of elite interests, elite resistance has inevitably increased, which will create setbacks for Xi’s program to concentrate his power and will put pressures on his policy choices.

However, the concentration of power in the hands of one person is a road that allows no U-turns. In the case of Xi Jinping, who has a bunker-type mentality, this is especially the case. Under pressure, Xi may partially retreat or may make some compromises, but only for the purpose of winning strategic advantages. Such pressures will ultimately inspire, and tactically enable, Xi’s further push toward his goal of concentrating power. In principle, the institutional arrangements in Chinese Communist politics close any possible channels for the preferences of subordinates to legitimately and effectively influence the preferences of the leaders. This has thus empowered Xi in his battle against elite resistance.
Nevertheless, any struggle between the dictator and his bureaucrats will undermine, rather than enforce, the former’s authority and power. As tensions grow to a certain degree, possibilities for the dictator to be toppled may exist, though this will be extremely difficult due to both institutional constraints and obstacles to collective action. Instead, the elites may choose not to cooperate with the dictator. As such “soft” resistance by the elites grows, it is likely that governance by the dictator of the huge nation will confront many challenges to promote both his domestic and foreign agendas.

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Notes

2. Such commissions are usually regarded as “informal,” as opposed to those organizations stipulated by the party charter. But, as indicated below, there is a difference between such commissions and the “leading small groups” and between commissions and non-institutional (political or policy) measures. In any case, this author emphasizes the interactions and “mutual contextualization” between formal and informal elements. See Guoguang Wu, *China’s Party Congress: Power, Legitimacy, and Institutional Manipulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
See the website of the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission:
http://www.cac.gov.cn/.

For an official document on these committee/commissions, see "中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》," March 21, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm. The difference between a committee and a commission is not clear. In fact, in Chinese they are the same, namely, 委员会, while here I follow the English translation in China Daily, the CCP-sponsored English-language newspaper, though also inconsistencies exist in the newspaper’s references to the same committee/commission.


See, for instance, 爱国知识网 [website on Patriotic Knowledge], December 27, 2015, http://www.aiguoxin.net/aiguomingyan/110.html; 出国留学网 [website for Overseas Study], https://www.liuxue86.com/k_%E4%B9%A0%E8%BF%91%E5%B9%B3%E8%AF%AD%E5%BD%95/.

For example, see 中共广东省委党校机关党建网 [website of the Guangdong Administration College of the Party School of Guangdong Province on Party Building], http://www.gddx.gov.cn/jgdwww/172396/172589/index.html.


35 For such events in Beijing, see, for example, https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20171201/china-beijing-migrants/, December 1, 2018; for the Jiangxi story, see https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20180803/china-coffins-cremation/, August 3, 2018.