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Has Xi Jinping made China's political system more resilient and enduring?

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a contextualised examination of whether Xi Jinping Thought, the latest rendition of Marxism-Leninism that functions as China's ideology, has made China's political system more sustainable. By scrutinising Xi's speeches and writings since he came to power in 2012, we demonstrate that his vision is premised on modifying consultative Leninism, China's post-Deng Xiaoping political framework, with strongman rule. This is intended to revitalise the Chinese Communist Party as a Leninist instrument to deliver comprehensive leadership, upgrade China's economy, Sinicise Marxism, nurture a party-centric nationalism, enhance legitimacy and claim global leadership on the world stage. In the process, he has revived the Maoist mass line to induce people to embrace national goals set by the Party, ultimately to persuade them that China's Leninist party-state is more 'democratic' and better at serving them than any other political system. We found that Xi's measures have enhanced the capacity of China's consultative Leninist state and thus the resilience of the regime in the short term. However, the substitution of collective leadership by strongman rule, and the end of predictable power transition by abolishing a term limit for himself, have undermined institutionalisation and reduced the endurance of the system in the long term.

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There is no doubt that Xi Jinping is changing China in significant ways, with a view to make its political system more robust, effective and powerful. He is also increasingly projecting China as a leading player on the world stage. But has he made the Chinese political system more resilient and thus more enduring?

Two contending schools of thought answer this question in apparently contradictory ways. On the one side, those who subscribe to regime theories and the modernisation theory argue that China's authoritarian system is inherently unsustainable and will change. On the other side, those who study authoritarian resilience underline the importance of not underestimating its resilience. The reality is that regime resilience, which can be understood as a regime's ability to keep its function and identity from being undermined by internal and external pressure,¹ is based on its legitimacy and capacity to satisfy the population. This can be achieved by a periodic renewal of the democratic mandate, buttressed by checks and balances that minimise the abuse of power and safeguard individual rights. But regime resilience can also be based on performance legitimacy delivered by strong, effective and

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well-received governance, reinforced by a credible ideology. For the latter, resilience also depends, as a final defence, on the governing body's capacity to repress any challenge effectively when it falls below the standards required for performance legitimacy. Any regime suffering a serious legitimacy deficit, democratic or authoritarian, may still be able to hold on to power for some time, if it can deploy a powerful repressive system effectively or co-opt a critical mass of supporters. If the political opposition is too weak and/or many citizens are state employees or depend on government handouts for a living, many in the population may acquiesce to the regime, however grudgingly, because they can see no realistic political alternative.² In these situations, the embattled incumbent regime may not only linger on, but may even rebuild performance legitimacy if it can rectify its failures in a timely fashion.

To those who subscribe to regime theories, authoritarian states are structurally fragile because of their lack of a democratic mandate, near absence of oversight, systematic disinformation and over-reliance on coercion. In this view, from the collapse of Communist states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (1989–1991) to the fall of dictatorships during the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, history has shown that what appears to be mass acquiescence to authoritarianism could simply be 'preference falsification'.³ This means that when a window of opportunity arises, the pent-up public frustration and structural regime weaknesses manifest in a concentrated manner to bring the regime down. Hence, by resisting democratisation, China's party-state will inevitably implode.⁴ This analysis echoes voluminous research built on Seymour Lipset's modernisation theory, which demonstrates a significant positive correlation between economic growth and democratisation.⁵ Minxin Pei suggests that the legacy of Maoist totalitarianism has given China's Leninist party-state – exceptionally well-organised, effective and powerful among dictatorships – the capacity to deliver a higher level of per capita income in China than other authoritarian states before it succumbs to the logic of the modernisation theory.⁶

In sharp contrast, advocates of authoritarian resilience see public opinion surveys throughout the 2000s as confirming that most Chinese citizens embrace the regime.⁷ Whether owing to material improvements to living conditions, successful propaganda and/or effective coercion, the mainland of China has experienced no mass democracy protests since 1989. The rectification-cum-anti-corruption drive and the rise of China have made Xi genuinely popular.⁸ When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrated the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2019, it also left behind the nightmare that China's Leninist state might not outlast the Soviet Union. As China rebounds from the COVID-19 pandemic ahead of other great powers, it is poised to surpass the US as the world's largest economy by 2028.⁹ There is strong *prima facie* evidence that China's Leninist state enjoys significant performance legitimacy.¹⁰

The juxtaposition of the two broad schools of thought reveals a significant omission, which is what Xi, now the paramount leader, thinks will make China's political system sustainable, and how changes he has brought about affect the resilience of the party-state. This matters as Xi has cleared the way for himself to rule for life, and has incorporated 'Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era' ('XJPT' for short) into the Party Constitution so that it can function as the state ideology in the way that Mao Zedong Thought did in an earlier era. The implications of the reintroduction of a reinvigorated ideology need to be taken into account as we examine the resilience of China's system.

This article does not take one or the other side of the debate above as its starting point. Instead, it offers a contextualised examination of Xi's thinking on what makes China's political

system sustainable. By scrutinising the widest possible selection of Xi's speeches and writings since he became China's top leader in 2012, we examine Xi's thoughts in six areas:

- the CCP's supremacy;
- the CCP and state apparatuses;
- public opinion management;
- economic development;
- party-centric nationalism; and
- foreign policy.

The six criteria are based on the 'consultative Leninist' analytical framework that Steve Tsang put forth in 2009 and augmented in 2020.¹¹ The premise of the framework is that China's political system in the post-Deng Xiaoping period (d. 1997) blends consultative features with Leninist instruments of control under a collective leadership, in order to improve governance while keeping the CCP's Leninist character, structure and organisational principles intact. The six criteria of this framework enable us to assess systematically whether the imposition of strongman rule on the consultative Leninist system under Xi in fact enhances or reduces the durability of the system. This includes examining how the re-introduction of a variant of Marxism-Leninism, framed as XJPT, impacts upon endurance.¹²

Shoring up the CCP's supremacy

Xi sees bolstering the CCP's supremacy as essential to the security and longevity of the regime. In April 2013, he issued 'Document no. 9' to order cadres at all levels to prohibit seven 'false ideological trends':

- 'western constitutional democracy' or 'constitutionalism';
- 'universal values';
- 'civil society';
- 'neoliberalism';
- 'western view of journalism';
- 'historical nihilism' – or views of Chinese history that diverge from those put forward by the CCP; and
- negative assessment of 'the reform and opening up and the socialist nature of Chinese socialism'.¹³

Xi banished these ideas for being 'anti-China'. In their place he ordered cadres to dispense Marxist indoctrination and revise the political education curriculum from primary schools through universities to promote the CCP's supremacy and 'correct' thinking.¹⁴

Xi goes further by bringing back Marxism-Leninism to give ideological underpinning to the supremacy of the CCP and to guide all party members to reaffirm their beliefs. He did so by adding his interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, dubbed XJPT, into the Party Constitution in 2017 and the PRC Constitution in 2018. This should not be dismissed as a vanity project, like Jiang Zemin (Party General Secretary, 1989–2002) adding his 'Three Represents' or Hu Jintao (Party General Secretary, 2002–2012) introducing his 'Scientific Outlook on Development' to the Party Constitution. Xi systematically requires all party members and

public employees to meet and learn XJPT on a routine basis.¹⁵ He also encourages everyone else to do so and took advantage of technological advancements to introduce an app, *Xuexi qiangguo*, for learning it via mobile devices.¹⁶ While XJPT is still in the process of being codified and is not yet comparable to how Mao Zedong Thought functioned as the state ideology in the first quarter century of the PRC, Xi is unrelentingly driving the country to move in this direction. The revival of a state ideology is meant first and foremost to ensure the people of China embrace the CCP as the rightful institution to lead and govern China. By supplementing the revived ideology with a reinvigorated party-centric nationalism (about which more below), Xi also intends them to provide a much stronger force to guide the people of China to feel more confident in their country under the leadership of the CCP, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of the party-state.

Xi's idea about the centrality of the leadership of the CCP is encapsulated in the following statement, which originated with Mao,¹⁷ to mark the advent of his second term as party leader in 2017: 'The Party, the state, the military, the civilians, and the education sector; east, west, south, north, and the center – the Party leads everything.'¹⁸

Xi also believes that to sustain the CCP's centrality it must have a strong leader. He was successful in persuading or forcing his colleagues into accepting him as the 'core' of the Party Central in 2016. The party document that first hails Xi as the 'core' also exhorts cadres to maintain the 'four consciousnesses' – viz consciousness in 'politics, the overall situation, the core, and keeping in line'.¹⁹ To give it teeth, the Party Discipline Punishment Ordinance was revised in 2018 to incorporate the doctrine of the 'two upholds'. It binds party members to:

- uphold Xi's status as 'the Party Central's and the whole party's "core"'; and
- uphold 'the Party Central's authority and its centralized and unified leadership'.

Xi enforces the 'four consciousnesses' and 'two upholds' by using the rectification-cum-anti-corruption drive, which punished over three and a half million cadres from 2013 to the second quarter of 2021 and is ongoing, to keep cadres in line.²⁰ In Xi's view, loyalty to himself shores up the Leninist principle of 'democratic centralism', which requires complete obedience from a lower level party organisation to an upper level party organisation, and from the whole party to the Party Central. To Xi, getting himself accepted as the 'core' or supreme leader of the CCP makes this Leninist institution more effective and thus more resilient.

Enhance governance by strengthening the CCP's supervisory powers

Closely related to the above, Xi believes that for China's political system to be sustainable, the 'party leadership system' must be 'institutionalised'.²¹ Since the 'institutionalisation' of the political system first topped the party agenda in the 1980s, the successive party leaderships have never intended 'institutionalisation' to remove the involvement of formally retired party elders and/or political factions in top-level decision-making or leadership selection. Rather, the aim was to put in place certain rules to restrict their influence, prevent destabilising purges and promote meritocracy and power-sharing. It was on this basis that Jiang and Hu carried out institutionalisation by strengthening collective leadership and regularising leadership succession.²² Xi's idea of institutionalisation differs significantly from those of his two predecessors. He takes an anti-collective leadership approach to strengthen democratic centralism, a Leninist arrangement that centralises state power in the hands of the

CCP and the party's power in the hands of the top party leader. In his view, institutionalising the CCP's leadership over everything is needed for a country as vast as China, because only then can the Party Central realistically 'superintend all things' and 'coordinate all sides' in the policy process.²³

Xi's first step to institutionalise the party leadership system is to build a 'self-supervising system' in the CCP.²⁴ His approach was first mobilisational, then bureaucratic. Within months of coming to power, he launched what most people in China initially thought was an anti-corruption campaign. In reality, he set up a sustained party rectification-cum-anti-corruption drive, which he uses to rectify all wrongdoings, from sustaining cliques not loyal to him or gratuitous displays of ill-gotten wealth to having too many meetings, smoking in public, taking bribes or failing to implement the Party Central's decisions. To Xi, the root cause of these problems is lax party discipline.

In internal party speeches, especially those addressing senior officials and military leaders, Xi stressed that 'political disloyalty' is more damaging than corruption.²⁵ While Jiang and Hu only conducted anti-corruption campaigns, which were always time limited, Xi 'institutionalised' rectification-cum-anti-corruption by creating a new bureaucratic authority, the National Supervision Commission (NSC), in March 2018, shortly after he consolidated power at the end of his first term. The commission subsumed three state organisations with supervision authority into the CCP's in-house disciplinary watchdog, the Central Commission of Discipline Inspection (CCDI).²⁶ The NSC continues to enjoy the extrajudicial powers the CCDI used to have, and is charged to bring state employees under its supervision in line with what the CCDI used to do with party members.²⁷ To further 'institutionalise' the party leadership system, the same party decision that created the NSC announced the absorption of the State Civil Servants Bureau by the CCP's Organisation Department, alongside other mergers of state departments into party units with overlapping policy portfolios.²⁸ Xi has thus reduced the functional separation between the CCP and state apparatuses.

The CCP's encroachment on the state was only one building block of Xi's party leadership system. It is complemented by the creation of 'deliberation and coordination organs' at the top party level. Commonly known as 'central leading small groups' (CLSGs), they used to be the most opaque party organisations, with their membership, meeting frequency and agenda kept secret. Xi has made the basic information of CLSGs transparent to highlight their centrality in decision-making, and in that sense substantially enhanced party leadership. Simultaneously, in the interest of maximising his personal power, he keeps their workings secretive to permit himself maximum manoeuvrability. As a result, the CLSGs are 'institutionalised' to reinforce democratic centralism, not to restrict Xi's powers. This enables Xi to use the dozen or so CLSGs he chairs to coordinate top-level cross-agency policymaking in a way that bypasses the Politburo, the platform for collective decision-making under Jiang and Hu. All these indicate that Xi is reviving and revitalising the Leninist party-state that subordinates the state apparatus to the party machinery, with himself as supreme leader.

Consulting and shaping public opinion

To pre-empt demands for democratisation, Xi believes that he must persuade the Chinese people that China's political system is 'democratic' and better at serving them than any western political systems.

According to Xi, China practises 'consultative democracy', which 'carries out broad-based consultation under the Party's leadership, combining democracy and centralism'.²⁹ Xi's understanding of 'democracy' is based on the Maoist principle of the 'mass line'. It requires the CCP to 'go to the masses' to collect their views, incorporate enough of them into the party's policies, then use the party's powerful propaganda machinery to convince 'the masses' that these policies are the superior manifestation of their wishes.³⁰ Xi is keen to reinvent the 'mass line' at all levels, so that the people can feel that they have a familial bond with the CCP, as if they share 'blood and flesh ties'.³¹ To ensure implementation, he requires the rectification-cum-anti-corruption drive to incorporate training of cadres in the 'mass line', opens channels for the public to report on corruption, and makes it a punishable offence if cadres are found not to practise the 'mass line'.³²

By using the 'mass line', Xi's 'consultative democracy' proactively enlists the general public to embrace national goals chosen by the CCP. This manifested, for example, in his campaign to eradicate absolute poverty, which lasted from 2015 to 2020. He said in February 2021: 'The Party, the state, the military, the civilians, and the education sector are united in a concerted effort; the east, west, south, north, and the center are braided into one rope...the whole society has participated'.³³

Even though poverty alleviation in itself is important to Xi and the CCP, it has a greater significance: '[it] showcases that the leadership, organization, and implementation capacity of the Chinese Communist Party is incomparably powerful, and hence it is the most reliable leadership force to unite and lead the people ...'.³⁴ By using the CCP to mobilise the whole nation to channel resources to poor regions, Xi made his anti-poverty campaign an immersive experience to persuade everyone that they would achieve great things by rallying around the party. Xi's narrative of China's fight against the pandemic carries the same message: 'This great struggle against the COVID-19 Pandemic has fully demonstrated the obvious advantages of the Party's leadership and our country's socialist institutions'.³⁵

These official claims are supplemented by the propaganda machine's contrast of China's success in 'eradicating' absolute poverty against failures in the Global South to do so, and against Western democracies' inability to contain the pandemic. Together, they showcase the superiority of China's socialist 'democracy' to Western democracies.³⁶ Under Xi the 'mass line' has been adapted by putting greater emphasis on the CCP going out proactively to shape public opinion and ensure the general public embrace the party's narrative.

Xi also capitalises on the popularity of his rectification-cum-anti-corruption drive and presents it as representing 'democracy' working properly. Public opinion polls conducted in China consistently recorded a high level of regime approval under Xi. The Ash Center of Harvard University reported that 93.1% of the Chinese citizens they interviewed were satisfied with the central government in 2016, compared with 92.8% in 2015 and 91.8% in 2011.³⁷ The World Values Survey also detected a rising level of regime approval in China: 94.6% of the Chinese citizens they surveyed expressed 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the central government in 2018, an increase from 84.6% in 2013.³⁸ Positive public responses confirm Xi's attempts to confuse people are effective. In line with Tsang's consultative Leninist framework, his willingness to respond to the people's demands on anti-corruption by bringing down a large number of corrupt cadres was to fend off demands for genuine democracy, without undermining the CCP's grip on power. Hence, he would not tolerate political supervision of the party by outsiders, and would promptly arrest citizen-activists who call for officials who are not already targeted by his

rectification-cum-anti-corruptive drive to publicise their assets.³⁹ The popularity of Xi in the country as a whole suggests he has managed to strengthen the popular legitimacy of the party-state, despite his turn to a more authoritarian approach.

Strengthening the economy

Xi subscribes, in general terms, to the CCP's cherished maxim of the era of 'reform and opening up' – 'development is the key to solving all of China's problems.'⁴⁰ In other words, he shares the view that performance legitimacy is essential to maintain the CCP's monopoly of power, which is the basic assumption that underpins the *de facto* social contract in place since 1990. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi redefined the 'principal contradiction in Chinese society'. He changed it from the 1982 formulation of 'people's ever-growing needs for material culture' (ie material needs) versus 'backward social productivity' (ie lack of economic development) to 'people's ever-growing needs for a good life' versus 'unbalanced and inadequate development'.⁴¹ This shows that Xi is improving the terms of the *de facto* social contract, and committing the CCP to deliver more to the general population. This move aligns the party's goals more closely to the people's rising aspirations. What he has not signalled is a commitment to economic pragmatism, which buttressed the economic miracle of the preceding three decades.

Indeed, Xi's predecessors took a trial-and-error approach of 'crossing the river by feeling for stones' underneath. In contrast, Xi prefers a systematic and clearly signposted approach to steer China's economic advancement. Under Xi, China is guided to devise and implement an industrial policy to transform itself into an innovative high-tech power, supplemented by an ambitious outreach scheme to secure international support. They manifested in the Made in China 2025 policy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁴²

Central to Xi's economic thinking is what he calls the 'dual circulation strategy'. It prescribes simultaneous stimulation of:

1. 'internal circulation', or increasing import substitution and expanding domestic consumption, and on this basis, actively attracting foreign capital into China, to generate a virtuous domestic economic cycle; and
2. 'external circulation', by pursuing a more proactive open strategy to attract foreign investment, particularly in technology-intensive and other strategically important sectors.⁴³

Xi claims that the 'internal circulation' aspect of his 'dual circulation strategy' does not imply de-coupling from the rest of the world. He insists that it is merely needed to make China more resilient to external shocks.⁴⁴ In reality, the dual circulation approach is meant to make sure the domestic economy will continue to support growth and improvement in people's living standards without being dependent on the advanced democratic West. It is to enable China to de-couple selectively. The continued opening to the outside world is to maximise China's capacity to absorb advanced technologies from external sources without being dependent on them. Conceptually this is an attractive approach; the real challenges are in the implementation.

To make the internal circulation policy work, Xi tries to narrow regional disparity by 'integrating the vast Chinese market'.⁴⁵ He initiated an ambitious urbanisation programme in

2016 to facilitate more equitable regional development and maximise the potential for growth. In this grand scheme, rich and poor cities adjacent to each other are organised into a 'city-cluster' or megapolis. He requires local governments in each cluster to formulate and implement grand plans of leveraging state policies and market forces to ensure 'co-development' in order to raise the overall prosperity of the city-cluster.⁴⁶ To maximise development synergies, Xi designates each city-cluster a 'connecting node' of the new transportation routes under the BRI.⁴⁷

Ultimately, Xi seeks to make China a technological superpower rivalling the US.⁴⁸ This aspiration explains the latitude the Chinese state has given to companies like Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, and Huawei. All private companies, they have made themselves the crown jewels of China's high-tech industries. In the case of Huawei, its strategic importance is such that the full weight of the Chinese state was brought to bear when its Chief Financial Officer was detained in Canada on a criminal charge pending extradition to the US.⁴⁹ It is also the only Chinese corporation, private or state owned, which has been allowed to assert publicly that it will ignore a Chinese law (requiring all companies to comply with government demands for access to data) without being reprimanded or even contradicted.⁵⁰

What should also be noted are the limits to Xi's tolerance. Xi is first and foremost a Leninist, and he prefers state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the 'political and material pillar for Chinese socialism', to spearhead China's technological rise.⁵¹ This explains why the State Council's 'three-year action plan for state-owned enterprises' (2020–2022) sets 'no upper limit' for SOEs to purchase private firms. Xi has unambiguously warned the executives of private companies that they themselves must 'obey the Party' if they want their companies to develop.⁵² This underpins government interference into the initial public offering in late 2020 of the Ant Group, a spin-off of the Alibaba Group under Jack Ma. There is little doubt that the techno-financial services Ant offers are cutting-edge, but the market dominance of Ma's companies and his public defiance of regulatory requirements proved too much for Xi. Thus, the party-state not only put the Ant Group and Ma in their places but also has started to enforce fines and regulations on the other leading fin-tech companies.⁵³ The reining in of Ma and the fin-tech champions illustrates the limits of Xi's economic pragmatism in practice.

Reinvigorating party-centric nationalism

Under Jiang and Hu, China's consultative Leninist system relied on party-centric nationalism to fill the ideological void, as Communism could no longer function as the state ideology after the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989.⁵⁴ With Xi dedicated to reviving Marxism-Leninism, now dubbed XJPT, the apparent need for him to rely on nationalism should be reduced, if not eliminated. This has not happened. Instead, Xi puts even greater emphasis on party-centric nationalism. To Xi, this is not about filling any ideological void, but about integrating party-centric nationalism into XJPT. He works to make the Chinese people believe that the CCP is not only a defender of the nation in times of crisis, but also the heir to the grandiose Chinese civilisation, a source of national pride. He also rewrites history to underpin the legitimacy of the party's claim to monopolise power, and to provide a basis to portray the party-state as manifesting the 'firmest foundation' for 'self-confidence' in China's political system.⁵⁵

He uses three narratives to inspire confidence that under his leadership the CCP will deliver the 'China Dream' of national rejuvenation. The first is that the party is the ultimate

inheritor of the Confucian philosophy of moral, benevolent, people-centred and meritocratic governance and will lead China to a new golden age. To this end, he cited a long list of Confucian axioms to justify 'modernising the state governance system and capacity' by 'institutionalising' the 'party leadership system'.⁵⁶ His second narrative focuses on how ancient China's scientific inventions proved that the Chinese people are endowed to win today's technological race.⁵⁷

His third narrative is that China has always been a peace-loving nation. He declares: 'China was for a long time in history one of the most powerful countries in the world, but it has not left behind a record of colonising or invading other countries'.⁵⁸ This suggests that other countries must be prejudiced if they condemn China for using economic leverage or force in the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea or other territories that China claims. As far as Xi is concerned, China's actions in all territorial disputes are purely defensive. The approved historical narratives in China preclude any possibility that China could have an imperialist or aggressive legacy.

In an important sense, Xi overheats party-centric nationalism to melt everyone in China into one patriotic people. He declares that 'patriotism is the duty and obligation of every Chinese', and all who do not embrace it are 'shameless and have no standing in their own country and in the world'.⁵⁹ This gives him and the CCP the moral authority to silence critics of his foreign (or, indeed, any) policy, and to denounce anyone deemed a threat to the party as 'unpatriotic', and thus a subject for re-education or repression. This applies not only to political dissidents among the majority Han but also to ethnic minorities, as well as religious believers and anyone who harbours an identity Xi deems incompatible with that of a 'Chinese patriot'. The reinvigorated party-centric nationalism justifies the demolition of churches or mosques, the internment of Xinjiang Muslims and the prosecution of members of Hong Kong's political opposition.⁶⁰ In the short term, there is no doubt that Xi has made party-centric nationalism a potent force in strengthening state power and ideology-based legitimacy. In the longer term, his use of party-centric nationalism is akin to riding a tiger, which he may find it difficult to dismount from or to control fully.

A party-state realist approach to global leadership

Foreign policy is usually the least important factor underpinning regime resilience. Xi has, however, made foreign policy relevant as his promise to deliver the China Dream requires persuading the world to acknowledge that he has made China great again. Xi's approach chimes with Tsang's party-state realist framework for foreign policymaking, all the more so because he has openly put forth the concept of 'composite outlook of state security' as a main guiding principle for conducting China's foreign relations.⁶¹ In line with the party-state realism analysis, Xi underlines the importance of defending China's 'territorial integrity, security, and development interest' and the many non-traditional security risks in order to ensure the security of the state or the regime.⁶² It means China pursues a foreign policy that aims first and foremost to sustain the CCP's monopoly of power. It also implies that Xi's China seeks to make the world safe for authoritarian states – required to pre-empt 'colour revolutions' that can spread to China – and assert a leadership role in global affairs.

The starting point of Xi's realist calculation is that 'global prosperity needs China'. This gives China enormous leverage, and he directs Chinese diplomats to exploit it to the full. On the surface, Xi's vision is to 'construct a community of shared destiny for humankind',

where 'you become part of me, and I become part of you.'⁶³ What he has left unspoken, though understood, is that China will play a, or preferably the, leading role. To achieve this he is prepared for China to ease market access for foreign firms, export capital, help countries build infrastructure via the BRI, allow the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to adhere to global standards, selectively forgive loans for some developing countries, donate to the 'ten big Sino-African cooperation projects'⁶⁴ and supply Chinese vaccines to the Global South.⁶⁵ Xi also appeals to Western liberal democracies to respect that 'each country has their own cultural and social system.'⁶⁶ He complements the economic carrot with a big stick, threatening to punish countries or corporations that 'hurt the feelings of the Chinese people', but promising economic rewards if they shift position and toe Beijing's line.⁶⁷

In order to enhance China's global leadership, Xi seeks to 'reform the global order and institutions'. He does not see China as a revisionist power, just a reformist one supporting 'the principle of sovereign equality underpinning the charter of the United Nations.'⁶⁸ He stresses that 'national sovereignty' – broadly defined as state behaviour – should be respected unconditionally, even if this means tolerating gross human rights abuse.⁶⁹

Xi sees the multilateral institutions China has established, especially the AIIB, the BRI and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, as platforms that facilitate reform of the global order. Relatedly, China proactively changes how agencies of the United Nations work by nominating its citizens or officials to lead them or supporting the nominees of friendly countries.⁷⁰ Xi also gets China to lead rulemaking in 'new realms of global governance' such as cyberspace, where international rules or norms are not yet in place or fully developed. He works to secure support for such initiatives from developing countries, particularly those that have received Chinese aid, which he describes as China's 'natural allies in international affairs.'⁷¹

As Xi leads China to take an assertive approach to foreign policy, he prepares the Chinese people to confront and dismiss international backlash. He predicts that 'the risks and challenges facing China will be ever so complex' and 'will be with us ... at least throughout the whole process of accomplishing the second centenary goal'⁷² or until 2049. He thus exhorted all cadres to 'resolutely struggle against any risks and challenges that undermine the Chinese Communist Party's leadership and China's socialist institution.'⁷³ Although he almost certainly wishes to avoid a military clash, he is preparing China for such an eventuality. Hence his clear instructions to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) – which he stresses is 'the Party's military' – to strengthen the CCP's leadership and to carry out modernisation, so that it can 'arrive immediately when called, ready for combat, and surely win.'⁷⁴

Has Xi made consultative Leninism more resilient?

The above shows that changes Xi has introduced are meant to enhance the capacity of the consultative Leninist system and should make it more resilient and enduring. They are intended to reinvigorate the party-state, with its legitimacy buttressed by the reintroduction of a state ideology, and reinforced by party-centric nationalism and a proactive drive to shape public opinion. The ideology, XJPT, is still a work in progress, and its strength is also the source of its weakness. It requires China to strengthen its Leninist party system, assert the Chinese civilisation and history as not only compatible with but complementary to Marxism-Leninism, and to embrace the leadership of the man personally associated with the ideology, in order to deliver the China Dream of national rejuvenation. It gives a clear

direction for the Chinese state ship to sail, which was lacking in Deng's pragmatism. But it also imposes a rigid and top-down approach to policymaking and governance that undermines the entrepreneurial spirit and collective wisdom in policymaking that the Dengist approach nurtured hitherto. Its implementation makes the party-state more effective in the short term, which is its strength, but reduces its capacity to respond flexibly and pragmatically over the longer term, which is its weakness.

Xi's approach is further supported by an industrial policy designed to make the economy innovative and less reliant on the outside world, and a foreign policy that utilises all available leverage to defend the national interest of which the centrepiece is the CCP's monopoly of power. Xi no doubt sees this as making the Chinese political system more enduring.

Focussing on Xi's views leaves out the challenges that his changes have brought. Four key factors that he thinks will make consultative Leninism more robust have also, ironically, reduced its resilience. They are:

- the end of collective leadership;
- the end of a predictable and orderly succession;
- the return to a more statist approach to managing the economy; and
- the end of Deng's policy to hide capabilities and bide for time.

The substitution of collective leadership by strongman rule created an echo chamber in the policymaking establishment. For over two decades after the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, the CCP avoided any major policy mistake that could pose an existential threat to itself by steadily increasing the scope for internal policy debates. Following Xi's success in securing the status as core leader and the introduction of XJPT, the scope for such debates has been reduced dramatically, if not eliminated completely. This replaced one of the greatest sources of resilience with a reliance on Xi always getting things right – a requirement that is impossible over the long term. The centralisation of power in Xi's hands also implies that when he makes a major policy mistake, such as the assimilation of the Uyghurs, the system amplifies its magnitude and consequences.

The removal of a term limit to Xi as leader of China ended the most important attempt at institutionalisation in the Deng era – regularisation of the succession process. Since 2017, it is no longer clear who will succeed Xi and how this will come about. It also ended the tutelage arrangement in which the next-generation leader served as an apprentice for five years prior to taking over the top offices. It is possible that Xi may yet put forth a new scheme for succession, but there is so far no indication of one being devised. This lack of a clear, predictable and orderly succession process exposes the system to intense power struggle and instability as succession approaches.⁷⁵

The return to a more statist approach to manage the economy under Xi, buttressed by the re-introduction of a variant of Marxism-Leninism as the state ideology, raises questions about how pragmatic Xi will be when the economy hits major turbulence. It is one thing to see the world's second largest economy takes advantage of greater planning and regulation when the going is good. Whether the strong hand of the party-state will deliver the same positive outcome when the going gets tough will depend on Xi getting it right. So far, Xi has always doubled down when his authority is being challenged. If the same policymaking pattern holds, the rigidity of Xi's approach is likely to undermine the resilience of the system when adaptability is needed the most.

Finally, China's Dengist economic miracle was built not only on the entrepreneurship of the Chinese people, which Deng unleashed after the crippling totalitarianism of Mao, but also on the willingness of the US and other advanced countries to invest in China and share technologies and management know-how. Xi's directives to Chinese cadres to 'unsheathe swords' has brought about 'wolf-warrior diplomacy'.⁷⁶ It has the effect of raising alarm in democracies and advanced economies. The heightened and systemic abuse of human rights in Xinjiang, as well as repression in Hong Kong, have added to the uneasiness of democratic states. While the more statist approach over an enormous economy gives the party-state powerful leverage in normal times, it also reduces its pragmatic flexibility to manage a crisis, which is going to weaken its resilience. With Xi changing how China is perceived globally and deepening economic de-coupling, external goodwill and help are unlikely to be forthcoming. Unless China can devise a new paradigm, its longer term resilience will be reduced.

The Chinese leadership's response to the pandemic is a good example of the tension between short-term effectiveness and longer term resilience. In the early months of 2020, Xi successfully mobilised the vast network of party cells at the grassroots to enforce a draconian lockdown policy, which contained the spread of the pandemic effectively. China was also one of the first countries in the world to implement a nationwide track-and-trace system using an app installed in mobile devices. It is a matter of fact that the COVID-19 infection rate and death toll in China – the only major economy to achieve positive economic growth in 2020 – are significantly lower than in most countries. These achievements have no doubt bolstered regime resilience in the short term.⁷⁷

However, the Chinese Government's obsession with controlling the narrative of the pandemic – which Xi believes is crucial to preserving the CCP's and his personal prestige, as can be seen in our discussion on public opinion management – has led to a reluctance to share information with the outside world. This applies whether it is information relating to the government's response in the days and weeks after the virus was first detected in Wuhan or clinical trial data of Chinese vaccines. The lack of disclosure certainly does not help, and arguably even impedes, global efforts to combat the pandemic and prevent a possible recurrence.⁷⁸ In light of China's centrality in global production, supply and distribution chains, not to mention its expanding global interests, it is the absence of deadly viruses, which know no national borders, that can best serve its long-term interests.

Conclusion

According to XJPT, modifying consultative Leninism with strongman rule is what makes China's political system more sustainable. Xi strongly disagrees with regime theories that authoritarian states are inherently structurally fragile. A diehard Leninist, he believes that all states, regardless of regime type, are fragile if they lack ideological conviction, political discipline and national unity. He considers the root cause of such weaknesses to be not the stifling of political liberties or the lack of democratic processes, but the absence of a strong leadership that can deliver ideological guidance, effective governance, national stability, unity, wealth and pride.

By demanding loyalty to himself and centralising power in his hands, Xi has equated personal supremacy with party supremacy. His governance reform serves to 'institutionalise'

in the Leninist sense of the word, ie to reinvigorate the 'party leadership system' in order to make the CCP a tightly disciplined instrument to govern China. He does so by creating an organisational mechanism to routinise rectification-cum-anti-corruption, enlarge the scope for disciplinary investigation, minimise functional separation between the CCP and state apparatuses, and make prominent use of the CCP's CLSGs to bypass the collective decision-making process based on the Politburo. Xi leveraged the CCP, as a revitalised and expanded Leninist instrument, to:

- rally the Chinese people around the CCP to achieve national goals, from eliminating poverty to cracking down on corruption;
- pool national resources to upgrade China's economy to become more coordinated, resilient to shocks and technologically innovative;
- Sinicise Marxism to nurture patriots, while punishing the 'unpatriotic'; and
- claim global leadership for China on the world stage.

He uses all of these to cultivate a popular perception that only with strict party discipline under his leadership can China achieve great things. Through such a narrative and policies, which coalesce under his lofty promise of rejuvenating the Chinese nation and his vilification of Western liberal democracies, he makes the population embrace the idea that regime security is a prerequisite for China's success. In the short term, such measures have unquestionably enhanced the capacity of the consultative Leninist state.

As he does so, he has also inadvertently undermined the resilience of the system over the longer term. This applies domestically in reducing the utilisation of collective wisdom and in weakening the institutional capacity to reach agreement in times of adversity. It also applies externally in making advanced democratic countries less economically integrated with China and less willing to bail out a Leninist state dedicated to making the world less safe for democracies.

All in all, the apparent dichotomy between regime and modernisation theories on the one hand and authoritarian resilience on the other is not real. They focus on different time frames, which accounts for their seemingly contradictory prognostications. In reality, both are right in what they have examined, as Xi's reforms have enhanced the resilience of the regime in the short term at the expense of longer term endurance. Xi's approach requires the party-state and in particular its supreme leader to be right all the time for the resilience to last. As this cannot be sustained indefinitely, his reforms make the consultative Leninist system in China less rather than more enduring beyond his lifetime. What cannot be known is the time frame in which enhanced resilience will tip into reduced resilience, as this is a dynamic process that is subject to change as events unfold, although the death of Xi is likely to be a testing time for China and its political system. Unless Xi's policy should take a sudden turn and cause a cataclysmic failure, the chance of the system imploding under his leadership is very low.

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Notes

1. See Heilmann and Perry, "Embracing Uncertainty," 8–9.
2. Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism*.
3. Kuran, "Now out of Never."
4. Gilley, *China's Democratic Future*; Ci, *Democracy in China*.
5. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy."
6. Pei, "China: Totalitarianism's Long Shadow."
7. Cunningham, Saich, and Turiel, "Understanding CCP Resilience."
8. Nathan, "Culture, Complicity, and Identity."
9. Reuters, "China to Leapfrog US."
10. Cunningham, Saich and Turiel, "Understanding CCP Resilience"; Nathan, "Culture, Complicity, and Identity."
11. Tsang, "Consultative Leninism"; Tsang, "Party-State Realism."
12. XJPT is presented in the official media to cover almost every imaginable topic, from the eye-sight of school children to ageing population, archaeological research to environmental management, Confucianism to foreign investment. It is true that Xi does talk about many things, which is how he cultivates his persona as a powerful leader who is attentive to details and works tirelessly for the people. It should be noted that the propaganda machine, including the several dozens of XJPT research centres and institutes in China, has a vested interest to expand the scope for XJPT in order to display loyalty to Xi. The aim of this article is not to survey the entirety of XJPT, but to focus on the aspects of XJPT that relate most closely to regime resilience. In our view, these aspects of XJPT can be effectively encapsulated using the six dimensions of consultative Leninism.
13. ChinaFile, "Document 9."
14. Ibid.; Xi, "Take the Cultivation and Promotion."
15. Xi, "Speech at the Education Work Conference"; Guo, "Accelerate the Construction of a Marxist Political Party."
16. *China Daily*, "Xuexi qiangguo."
17. See Zhu, "Uphold and Strengthen the Party's Comprehensive Leadership."
18. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 3, 16.

19. Sixth Plenum of the 18th CCP Central Committee, "Communique."
20. See annual reports of the CCP's Central Commission of Discipline Inspection, available at <http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/>
21. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 3, 125–26.
22. Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics*.
23. Xi, "Most Intrinsic Feature of Chinese Socialism."
24. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 3, 52.
25. Xi, "Speech at the All-Army Political Work Conference."
26. These state organisations were the Ministry of Supervision, the National Bureau of Corruption Prevention, and General Administration of Anti-Corruption and Bribery of the Supreme People's Procuratorate.
27. Sapio, *Sovereign Power and the Law in China*.
28. CCP Central, "Decision on Deepening Reform."
29. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 2, 293.
30. Blecher, "Consensual Politics in Rural Chinese Communities."
31. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 3, 21.
32. Xi, *Governance of China*, 365–380.
33. Xi, "Speech at the National Meeting to Conclude."
34. Ibid.
35. Xi, "Speech at the Mobilization Meeting for Learning"
36. S. Yang, Zhang, and Cui, "Patriotism, Youth Ideals and CPC Roots."
37. Cunningham, Saich, and Turiel, "Understanding CCP Resilience."
38. "World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–2020)," 22; "World Values Survey Wave 6 (2010–2014)," 48–49.
39. Pils, "Independent Lawyer Groups."
40. Xi, "Speech at the First Meeting of the Second Plenum."
41. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 3, 9.
42. Naughton, "China's Global Economic Interactions."
43. CCP Central, "Recommendations for Formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan."
44. Xi, "Several Major Issues."
45. Xi, "Grasp the New Development Stage."
46. State Council, "Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan."
47. National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, "Vision and Actions."
48. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 3, 248.
49. Scherer, "China Denies 'Coercive' Diplomacy."
50. Y. Yang, "Is Huawei Compelled?"
51. Xi, "Several Major Issues."
52. Xi, "Guide the Younger Generation."
53. Qian, Yuan, and Jia, "In Depth: No More Regulatory Blind Eye."
54. Gries, *China's New Nationalism*.
55. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 3, 18.
56. Ibid., 119–121.
57. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 2, 202.
58. Xi, *Governance of China*, 265.
59. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 3, 334.
60. Lam, *Fight for China's Future*.
61. Tsang, "Party-State Realism."
62. Xi, *Governance of China*, 200–01.
63. Ibid., 261.
64. For these economic initiatives, see Naughton, "China's Global Economic Interactions." For the Sino–African projects, see Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 2, 456–60.
65. Wee, "China Wanted to Show off Its Vaccines."
66. Xi, "Speech at the Davos Agenda."
67. Mattlin, "Normative Economic Statecraft."

68. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 2, 523.
69. Ibid.
70. Tung and Yang, "How China Is Remaking the UN."
71. Xi, *Governance of China*, Vol. 3, 429.
72. Ibid., 226.
73. Ibid.
74. Xi, *Governance of China*, 219.
75. McGregor and Blanchette, "After Xi: Future Scenarios," 10–19.
76. Tsang and Cheung, "Uninterrupted Rise."
77. McGregor, "China's Deep State."
78. Wee, "China Wanted to Show off Its Vaccines."

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