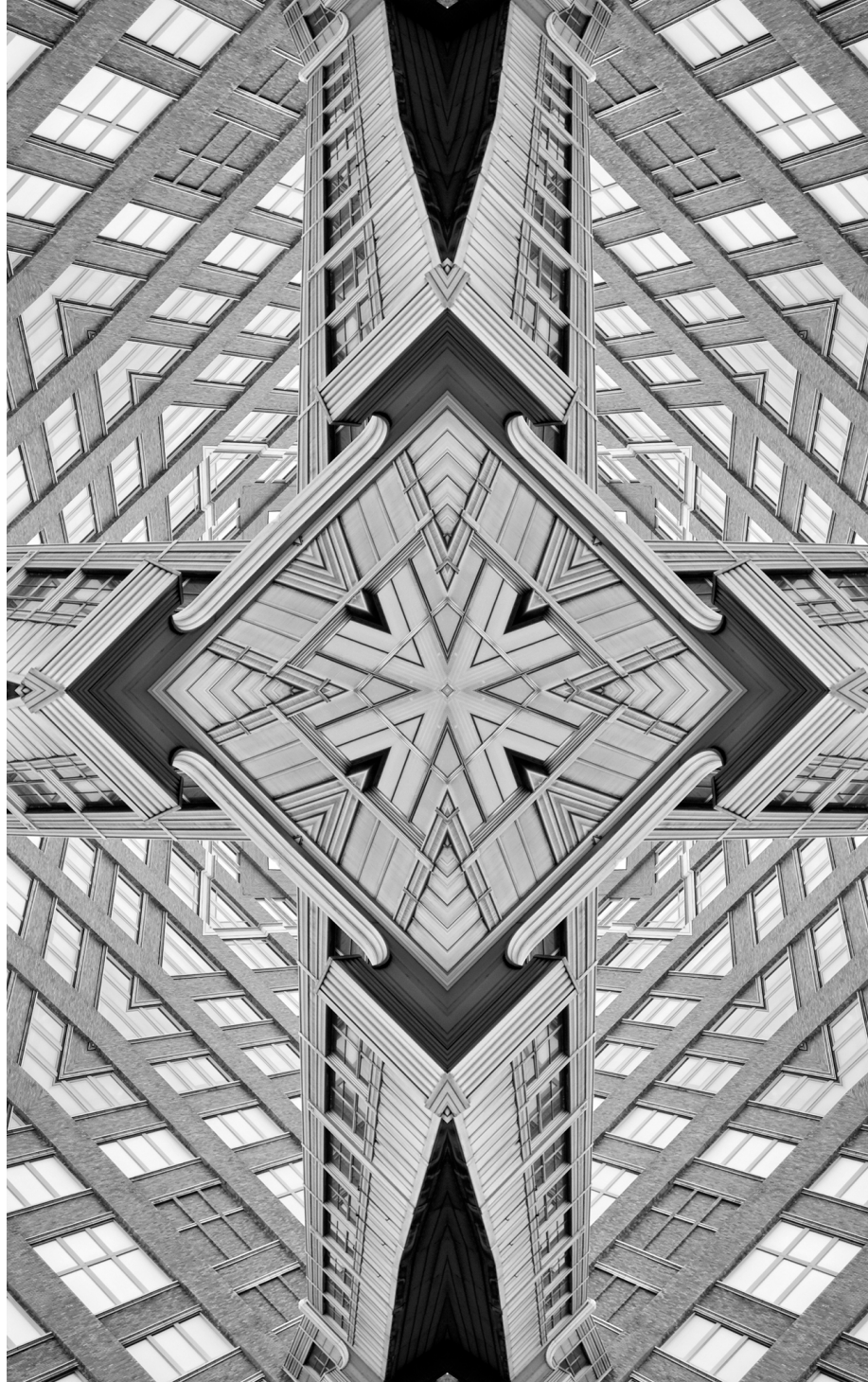


Issue

Brief

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Preserving National Security, the Xi Jinping Way

Kalpita A Mankikar

Abstract

China's assessment of its threat environment has evolved under President Xi Jinping, who underscores the imperative of bolstering traditional and non-traditional security. The Chinese Communist Party believes that inimical forces will attempt to overthrow it by penetrating the ideological sphere. Additionally, following the tumultuous presidential succession in the US in 2021, China has sought to cast doubts on the virtues of democracy, and is leveraging pride in the Chinese system that champions loyalty to the regime.

National security has become a buzzword in China under President Xi Jinping's rule. In his speech marking the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in July 2021, Xi referred to national security and allied themes several more times than his predecessor Hu Jintao did during the party's 90th anniversary in 2011.¹ The CCP is aware that its buoyant outlook towards the external environment exists alongside nervousness about the party's longevity.² This buoyant view is clear from Xi's address to senior officials at a study session of the Party School of the Central Committee in the aftermath of the January 2021 attack on the US Capitol building by supporters of outgoing President Donald Trump. At that time, he asserted that while the world was undergoing profound changes, the time and situation were in China's favour.³ Chinese state-affiliated media termed the US Capitol attack as a collapse of the American political system and, by extension, of the country's penchant for promoting democracy abroad.⁴ At the same time, the CCP believes that the US continues to pursue a long-term policy of forcing it out of power by empowering civil society groups in the country.⁵ This has resulted in the CCP making proactively averting political risks a priority.⁶

In recent years, Xi has articulated a new threat environment for China and has approached this by expanding the remit of the security establishment and making changes in laws, personnel and organisations. Additionally, Beijing is leveraging its patriotic education campaign to instil regime loyalty among the Chinese population. The subtext of new themes in the patriotic education campaign aimed at the youth is that China's governance systems are superior to the Western ones. This issue brief examines how China's approach to national security has evolved under Xi.

An Altered View of National Security

Xuezhi Guo, professor of political science at Guilford College in the US, argues that since the CCP monopolises power in China and its political legitimacy is not based upon the people's will, internal security and intelligence are essential factors to ensure the party's longevity.⁷ Thus, a strong security system insulates the CCP from internal threats. Since China liberalised its economy in the late 1970s, the CCP's policy of rapid economic development has served as a significant source of legitimacy.⁸ From 1979 onwards, China's GDP grew at an annual rate of nearly 10 percent, before beginning a downward spiral in 2012, growing at less than 7 percent in 2015. Sheena Chestnut Greitens, a faculty fellow at the Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas at Austin, argues that China's conceptualisation of national security translates into the security of the regime, or the CCP's security and its capacity to govern society.⁹ Thus, with its performance legitimacy eroding, China's assessment of its threat environment has changed during Xi's tenure.

Sulmaan Wasif Khan, a Tufts University professor focused on Chinese foreign relations, points to a perception asymmetry that has a bearing on China's national security. According to Khan, although China may be seen as a powerful country globally, its rulers (from Mao Zedong to Xi) think of it as a fragile entity encircled by enemies.¹⁰ China's rulers saw ominous portents in events like the Tiananmen Square incident, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the downfall of fraternal communist states in Eastern Europe.¹¹ Khan posits that Xi remains worried about China sinking into chaos, which has resulted in an enormous concentration of political power in his hands in terms of directly managing the national security apparatus.¹² Guo echoes this line of thinking and theorises that before Xi's ascent to the top post, the security setup was "fragmented" not to pose a threat to the CCP,¹³ which resulted in a dual leadership approach. For example, the Ministry of Public Security and State Council (China's cabinet) were responsible for assigning duties and offering monetary and logistical support to the People's Armed Police. Meanwhile, the Central Military Commission (CMC) was tasked with training personnel and organisational matters, thus instilling competing allegiances.¹⁴

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Helena Legarda, a researcher at the Berlin-based Mercator Institute for China Studies, argues that the CCP has become more stringent about limiting Western influence in China to ensure its longevity under Xi. According to Legarda, the rise of globalisation has made it increasingly challenging for China to segregate internal and external threats, leading to the institution of the Chinese National Security Commission.¹⁵ She opines that, under Xi's watch, a novel concept of “comprehensive national security” has been formulated to tackle threats to the CCP that arise from China's increasing integration with the outside world.¹⁶ This new conception of national security aims to bring together disparate policy sectors under an all-encompassing framework. The concept currently incorporates traditional security areas (political, territorial, and military) alongside new areas, such as cultural and scientific security and of China's overseas interests. New legislation like the National Security Law, the National Intelligence Law, and Cybersecurity Law have been promulgated to operationalise this outlook.

In Mandarin, the terms' national security and 'state security translate to *guójiā ānquán*. State security can be defined as the consolidation of the CCP's ruling position, meaning any threat to the state is, by extension, a threat to the party.

According to Boston University professor Joseph Fewsmith, China's ebullient outlook towards its external environment exists alongside domestic paranoia about the CCP's sustainability.¹⁷ No Communist party globally has lasted longer than 74 years in power. The CCP, which modelled itself on the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, completed 72 years in power in October 2021. In 1989, the CCP faced a substantial challenge to its rule from student-led demonstrators. Exasperated with curbs on political freedom and economic woes, protestors demanded the freedom of speech, free media and democratic representation but were met with a swift state crackdown. Some cadres and government officials sympathised with the movement, exposing schisms in the CCP.¹⁸

'Colour revolutions'—protests in Georgia, Ukraine, and the Kyrgyz Republic between 2003 and 2005 that led to the collapse of Russia-leaning regimes in those countries—played a role in how China perceived the US. Russian officials saw the US and Western-funded non-profits as aiding the activists and youth movements that propelled the demonstrations to come to fruition.¹⁹ The elite in

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Russia promoted the narrative that the US would try to export its revolutionary model to countries with an authoritarian political structure.²⁰ The colour revolutions exacerbated notions of Western interference in Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Communist domain and of NATO and European Union expansions in post-Soviet nations.²¹

These concerns also resonate in China, where worries persist of “Western hostile forces” ideologically infiltrating the CCP. An internal CCP document cautioned that “rival forces create disarray in society and topple regimes by breaching the ideological sphere and creating confusion among people”.²² Additionally, according to Xi, China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the West's “faltering response” is another sign that the US is declining and trying to impede its ascent.²³

Notably, more than three decades after the Tiananmen Square incident, many of the underlying causes of unrest persist. Thus, Xi's most significant concern has been China's internal security.²⁴ By leveraging this threat environment, Xi has converted the animosity toward the US into his political constituency within the CCP.²⁵

“China is concerned that the West will ideologically infiltrate the CCP to impede its ascent and instigate the regime's downfall.”

The CCP's Changing Priorities

The CCP's different leadership generations have had diverse approaches to national security based on their overall agenda. When Deng Xiaoping assumed power in the late 1970s, economic growth was a top priority, with national security issues accorded secondary importance.²⁶ Economic development was perceived as the key to the country's and the CCP's long-term stability. This approach merited cooperation and compromise with the West. Therefore, China pursued a path of integration into the international community, joining the World Trade Organization and other international bodies and engaging in exchanges with other countries even on sensitive issues like human rights. Xi has upended this thinking by asserting that "security is the precondition of development, and development is the safeguard of security".²⁷

The CCP elite congregates annually at the plenum to chart important policy initiatives for that year and beyond and issue communiques after these gatherings. In an authoritarian state, official communiques are policy tools rather than public communication. The communiques usually follow a standard template, but in the Chinese political system, minute changes in expression reflect an enormous shift in ideology, Chinese economists Qian Yingyi and Jinglian Wu argue.²⁸

A study of the CCP's plenum communiques highlights how its priorities have changed between 2015 and 2020. In 2015, the CCP leadership perceived "economic slowdown" as its defining challenge, as reflected in the communique of the fifth plenary session of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP. Since 1978, China has consistently lowered poverty through market liberalisation and rapid economic growth. As incomes rise, the leadership has shifted the emphasis from the quantity of growth to its quality. The phrase 'quality of development' was mentioned five times in the 2015 plenum document, alongside 13 mentions of 'security'. In 2020, the worries and challenges were different. While the slowdown in economic growth found no mention in the 2020 plenum communique, the terms 'security', 'quality of development' and 'innovation' were cited 22, 16, and 15 times respectively.²⁹

The 2020 plenum session resolved to synchronise economic development and build a higher level of 'safe China'. For this, Xi has proposed four requirements for national security³⁰:

- Coordinating traditional and non-traditional security
- Integrating security into every domain
- Preventing and resolving risks having an impact on China's modernisation
- Build a strong protective screen for national security

Existential threats

A leitmotif of the Xi era is the articulation of threats to national security. In his speech marking the CCP's centenary in 2021, Xi referred to 'national security' six times more than Hu did during the party's 90th anniversary in 2011. He also referred to the allied themes of 'strong army' and 'Chinese nation'.^{31,32}

**Table 1:
Themes mentioned in the 2021 and 2011
speeches**

| Themes | Xi Jinping (2021) | Hu Jintao (2011) |
|---|-------------------|------------------|
| National security (<i>guójiā ānquán</i>) | 7 | 1 |
| Strong army (<i>qiáng jūn</i>) | 6 | 2 |
| Rejuvenation (<i>fùxīng</i>) | 26 | 11 |
| Chinese nation (<i>zhōnghuá mínzú</i>) | 44 | 24 |
| Reform (<i>gǎigé</i>) | 8 | 44 |
| Five principles of peaceful coexistence (<i>héping gòngchǔ wǔ xiàng yuánzé</i>) | 0 | 1 |
| Head broken (<i>tóu pò</i>) | 1 | 0 |
| Blood flowing (<i>xuè liú</i>) | 1 | 0 |

The CCP's Changing Priorities

In 2013, Xi noted that China faced threats to political security and social stability and that these were the most complicated domestic and external factors.³³ The CCP's main challenges, categorised as the 'three big dangers,' are³⁴: First, threats from subversion and 'splittism' emerging from incessant ethnic unrest in the Tibet and Xinjiang autonomous regions. Second, the destabilisation of reform and development. And third, the interruption of China's socialist system, which implies that there is growing resistance against the CCP's rule.

Xi's response to the heightened threat perception is an increased mandate for the security establishment. The Fourth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP in 2014 resolved to establish a Central National Security Commission (CNSC) to bolster a centralised, unified leadership over national security work. The primary duties of the body are to "formulate and implement a national security strategy, push forward the construction of national security rule-of-law, formulate national security work principles and policies, and study and resolve major national security issues."³⁵ In 1997, President Jiang Zemin had proposed setting up a body on the lines of the American National Security Council. In the absence of a consensus, the National Security Leading Small Group was established in 2000 to coordinate national security affairs. The CCP has blamed "subversive foreign forces" for fuelling separatism as Beijing faced resentment against its grip on Xinjiang and Tibet. With respect to the CNSC, the Chinese foreign ministry clarified that its work would be directed towards terrorists and separatists.³⁶ Thus, Xi's initiative to institute the CNSC seemed to stem from the need for an efficient mechanism to streamline the civilian and military sections of the security apparatus to combat the rising domestic pressures in the form of 100,000 cases of social unrest that threaten its rule.³⁷ Additionally, the 2014 plenum proposed that the new security philosophy rest on a legal structure that would revolve around a new gamut of national security legislation.³⁸

In 2015, China cleared the National Security Law to provide "a legal template for the overall national security outlook".³⁹ While the 1993 National Security Law centred on tackling espionage, the new law expanded the definition of national security to include "protection of the political regime, sovereignty, national unification, territorial integrity, people's welfare, and 'sustainable development' of the economy and society." Other security-related legislation

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that have been passed during Xi's tenure include the National Intelligence Law (2017), Counter-Espionage Law (2014), Counter-Terrorism Law (2015), Cybersecurity Law (2016), and the Foreign Non-Governmental Organisations Management Law (2016).

Additionally, that coast guard has been made accountable to the CMC, the apex military decision-making authority helmed by Xi.⁴⁰ The CMC was given complete charge of the People's Armed Police (PAP) in 2018.⁴¹ The agency had previously been under the joint jurisdiction of the CMC and the State Council. PAP units that had duties related to forestry, natural resource protection, and firefighting were given other mandates. The PAP has been directed to focus on three primary missions—internal security, maritime security and supporting the People's Liberation Army in times of conflict.⁴²

The CCP has also deployed legislative tools to strengthen the levers of control. Following the constitution of the CNSC, new security-related legislation for counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and national intelligence were cleared. Some of the laws have internal and external implications for dealing with what Xi has termed as interlocked challenges. For instance, a new law permits the coast guard to use weapons against foreign organisations and individuals that infringe on China's sovereign rights and jurisdiction at sea.⁴³ In June 2021, the National People's Congress cleared the Law Against Foreign Sanctions that targets "individuals and organisations that take part in the formulation, decision, and implementation of discriminatory restrictive measures" against China.⁴⁴

In addition to the formal institutions, there are several informal institutions of supervision and discipline. In 2018, China gave former Interpol head Meng Hongwei a 13-year jail term for graft and other misdemeanours. Meng had been a vice minister for public security and headed the coast guard ahead of its reorganisation.⁴⁵ Under a rectification drive that began in 2020, nearly 180,000 cadres received raps for violating party discipline. Of these, about 2,000 people working in courts, prosecutors' offices, prisons, with the police, and in national security were charged by the end of July 2021.⁴⁶ The rectification campaign is said to run until 2022 when the National People's Congress convenes.⁴⁷

Defending National Security

A key tenet of Xi's thinking is to build a strong protective screen for national security.⁴⁸ The CCP fears that the US's bid to oust it will be channelled by empowering civil society groups and political dissidents. This anxiety has increased China's efforts to create ideological resistance to foreign approaches towards governance, political reform, and civil society institutions.⁴⁹ Xi detailed his thoughts early on when he decoupled political reform in China from the Western electoral representation template. "There are some who think that reform is the same as adopting Western universal values and political systems... and if these things do not happen then it's not reform...our reform is one that will have Chinese characteristics," he asserted.⁵⁰

The CCP has tried to further its narrative that parliamentary democracy and attendant institutions and separation of powers (the division of administrative responsibilities into distinct branches to limit any one branch from exercising the core functions of another) will delay the nation's development and its rise as a great power.⁵¹ The rancour fuelled by Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 US presidential election and the attempt by Trump supporters to supposedly prevent democratic succession by storming the US Capitol building in January 2021 seems to have been an inflection point for China in its efforts to promote the idea that democracy, which the US wants other nations to imbibe, has become outdated.⁵² While discrediting Western political systems as favouring the wealthy and being unsuitable to the Chinese context, China has built a narrative that its socialist democracy offers more representation.⁵³ Even so, civil society institutions in China have been in the line of fire. State-run media widely publicised the case of Tian (known only by his family name), a journalism student associated with a well-known Western media outlet and who the CCP accused of being in contact with several foreign groups hostile to China and providing "evidence" to tarnish the nation. The CCP used this case to establish that the real reason for Western countries to seek unfettered access and media freedoms in China is to destabilise the regime.⁵⁴

Another principle of Xi's philosophy on national security is preventing and resolving risks that impact China's modernisation.⁵⁵ China introduced the patriotic education course after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Among the teachings is the "hundred years of humiliation" hypothesis, an account of China's history from the 19th and 20th centuries emphasising the nation being


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“subjugated” by Western forces.⁵⁶ In the aftermath of the 2019 student protests in Hong Kong, Xi sought to tweak China’s education system, describing patriotism as the “eternal theme of education needed to plant the seed of loving China deep in the heart of every child,” and the CCP reinvigorated its patriotic messaging.⁵⁷

An analysis of the political component in the National College Entrance Examination, popularly called the *gaokao*, shows how China’s youth are being socialised in support of the regime.⁵⁸ Earlier the *gaokao* tested youngsters on themes of class struggle and dialectical materialism, derived from the writings of Communist thinkers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In recent years, the exam papers have featured questions on China’s political institutions like the National People’s Congress, China’s economic system, and the CCP’s role in China’s global rise.⁵⁹ Such education has also included visits to ‘patriotic museums’ that showcase the history of the CCP and its leaders, and school teachers must take their pupils on field visits to these museums. In the run-up to the CCP’s centenary celebrations, the party inaugurated a state-of-the-art patriotic museum in the Hunan province, Mao’s birthplace, where virtual reality and 5G technologies are being used to narrate the history of the CCP and various leaders.⁶⁰

The CCP is looking to tap into the people’s revolutionary spirit and is eagerly promoting travel to places that have a connection to the party.⁶¹ More than 33,000 monuments and places across the country have also been categorised as “revolutionary sites”.⁶² Pictures of smiling tourists in Red Army fatigues, underscoring loyalty to the CCP in uncertain times, are rampant. Speaking on the eve of the CCP centenary, Xi said he had visited every major revolutionary site and memorial related to the party’s history during his inspection tours since assuming office in 2012. Xi also asserted the need for the ‘red gene’ (*hóngsè jīyīn*) to permeate the blood and hearts and steer the youth to establish the right outlook on the world.⁶³ When the CCP highlights its achievements in reducing poverty and China’s growing global profile, it is building support for the regime. Youngsters thus see themselves as stakeholders and perceive their political and economic system as “one that works”. This, in turn, pre-empts domestic challenges for the CCP, such as the impetus for democratic change.⁶⁴

The primary plank of Xi's approach to national security is following a holistic strategy that underlines the linkages between internal and external security. This derives from a specific ideological prism. Xi sees the downfall of authoritarian regimes worldwide due to the 'colour revolutions' and Arab Spring as an outcome of instigation by hostile foreign forces led by the US.⁶⁵ Xi's counterstrategy is to prioritise preventing political risks.⁶⁶

The emphasis on prevention and control to manage Chinese society indicates a more proactive approach to governance than the previous strategy of maintaining stability.⁶⁷ This has translated into an aggressive national security approach. In 2020, China imposed a national security law on Hong Kong that expanded Beijing's powers to penalise critics and put a muzzle on dissenters. China has also been more aggressive toward Taiwan, an island Beijing views as part of its territory even though it has been governed independently since 1949. The CCP has faced international criticism over the severe repression of Uyghurs and other Muslims in the Xinjiang region. China has allegedly detained over one million Muslims in 're-education camps', and subjected people to forced sterilisations, constant surveillance, and religious curbs.⁶⁸ The US and a handful of other Western countries have determined that these abuses constitute genocide.⁶⁹ Consequently, China's actions have made engagement with the West untenable, and Xi's assertive national security strategy has served to unite the West against Beijing. 

Kalpita A Mankikar is a Fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org