KKI POLICY BRIEF

GERGELY SALÁT

THE POWER POLITICS OF XI JINPING
THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF XI JINPING
PART 2

HSZI CSIN-PING HATALMI POLITIKÁJA
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2. RÉSZ

INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

KE-2023/15

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Abstract: Xi Jinping, who was re-elected as Party General Secretary in October 2022, has been in power for a decade, and significant changes have taken place in China's domestic and international situation during these ten years. The second part of this three-part study focuses on Xi Jinping's domestic power politics. As Xi has taken a series of steps to strengthen both his own position and the Chinese Communist Party's control over society and the economy, the last decade was characterized by centralization in China. As the first part of the study suggests, these changes were not only the result of Xi Jinping's personal ambitions but also due to the general view of the party elites that without changing the course of Chinese development, the CCP may lose its power, and the country might disintegrate.

Keywords: China, People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, Chinese Communist Party

Összefoglalás: *Hszi Csin-ping, akit 2022 októberében újraválasztottak pártfőtitkárnak, már több mint egy évtizede van hatalmon, és ebben az időszakban jelentős változások mentek végbe Kína belső viszonyaiban és nemzetközi helyzetében. A három részből álló tanulmány második része Hszi Csin-ping belső hatalmi politikájára összpontosít. Mivel Hszi egy sor lépést tett saját pozíciójának, valamint a Kínai Kommunista Párt társadalom és gazdaság feletti ellenőrzésének megerősítésére, az elmúlt évtizedet a centralizáció jellemezte Kínában. Amint azt a tanulmány első része is sugallja, ezek a változások nem csupán Hszi Csin-ping személyes ambíciói miatt következtek be, hanem a pártelit általános nézetét támasztják alá, miszerint a kínai fejlődés menetének megváltoztatása nélkül a KKP elveszítheti hatalmát, és az ország széteshet.*

Kulcsszavak*: Kína, Kínai Népköztársaság, Hszi Csin-ping, Kínai Kommunista Párt*

Introduction

The first part of this paper examined the legacy of the Hu Jintao era.* Social inequalities, the decline of party control, the weakening of the party centre, corruption, environmental pollution, the deterioration of the international environment, demographic changes, and economic slowdown were identified as the most important problems the Xi Jinping administration has had to manage. Some of these problems were related to the power of the party and the party centre and

* The author would like to thank Judit Kálmán, Péter Bálint Szabó, and Veronika Tóth for contributing to the translation of this three-part study.

had to be dealt with through the means of power politics, while others were related to policy. This second part of the study focuses on the political aspects of Xi's first decade. The question whether the party centre was correct in assessing the threats to the country and its leadership is not addressed, as perception is more important in this case. Therefore, the term "needing to be done" does not refer objective needs in this paper, but the needs stemming from the logic and perceptions of the CCP elites.

In 2012, when Xi Jinping came to power, China was not threatened by an acute crisis, but serious changes were needed to secure the stability of the regime, and according to the party logic, the stability of the country for the long term. The fate of the Soviet Union did not escape the mind of the Chinese leadership, and the crumbling power of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the falling apart of that vast empire was often evoked as a deterrent for the Chinese. If the negative developments that became apparent under Hu Jintao were to continue, according to fears in Beijing, the Chinese political system could be similarly shaken in case of an unfortunate coincidence of certain adverse circumstances. Foreign analysts often portray the main political developments of the last ten years as a result of Xi's ambitions or dictatorial tendencies, but in reality, these logically follow from the problems that were outlined in the first part of this study. Xi Jinping was likely chosen for the management of these issues by the CCP's central leadership, including the party elders with informal power, and he has naturally grasped the opportunity he had gained through collective empowerment. Of course, the aims of the party and Xi's personal aspirations are intertwined, but his inclination towards hard-line politics is probably more a consequence of a collective decision than a series of personal choices.

Reinforcing personalistic rule

The most spectacular development in Xi Jinping's first decade was the strengthening of the personal power of the President and General Secretary. Xi abandoned the concept of collective leadership, which had been established by Deng Xiaoping, and returned to the ancient Chinese tradition of a one-man rule. Through systematic manoeuvring, he has made his power unquestionable and unrestricted in time, and he has successfully rendered his comrades secondary. While Hu Jintao was "first among equals", Xi Jinping has become "first above all". To achieve this, he has taken the following steps:

- He organized leading small groups, incorporating the top leaders responsible for overseeing different spheres of life (e.g. the economy, national security), and he became chairman of the eight most important groups. By doing so, he took control of these areas and their chiefs. For example, while the Premier was responsible for economic policies under his predecessors, in the new structure, the head of the State Council, Li Keqiang became a subordinate of the President and General Secretary in all matters, including the economy.
- The leaders of different state and party organs (including the National People's Congress, the State Council, the Supreme People's Court, and the members of the Politburo Standing Committee) have to submit annual reports to Xi Jinping, which

are then studied and evaluated by him.

- An anti-corruption campaign was used as a political weapon to eliminate Xi's enemies from every level of the leadership, and the vacant positions were filled with people loyal to him. He has also conducted cleansing campaigns in the apparatus responsible for public security, which numerous police chiefs and judges have fallen victim to.
- He has positioned his most loyal followers at the top of the organs responsible for monitoring the CCP's personnel affairs. He first commissioned a former subordinate of his father with leading the Organization Department of the party, then he did the same with one of his old schoolmates.
- Starting in 2015, he initiated a comprehensive reorganisation of the military, which has provided him with opportunities to remove military leaders whose loyalty was in doubt.
- A personality cult of Xi Jinping has been propagated widely, the like of which had been unseen since Mao Zedong. His pictures are everywhere, his activities are dealt with in separate columns of newspapers and news sites, and his speeches and other works are published in elegant volumes and studied in party meetings. Party members have to read the current guidelines provided by the General Secretary daily with the help of a mobile phone application, which is then checked by filling out a test.
- Xi Jinping's contribution to the development of Marxism, officially called "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" *(Xi Jinping xin shidai Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi sixiang),* was enshrined in the party constitution in 2017, and it was also included in the PRC's constitution in 2018. Consequently, it has become part of the country's official ideology, and as such, it is unquestionable and unchallengeable.
- In official documents, Xi Jinping is frequently referred to as the core leader *(lingdao hexin)*. Although informal, this title also highlights the authority of the top leader and his central role, and it was not given to Hu Jintao, unlike previous leaders (Jiang Zemin, Deng Xiaoping, and Mao Zedong). The slogan of two establishes *(liangge queli)* has been frequently evoked since 2021, which on the one hand indicates "establishing the status of Comrade Xi Jinping as the core of the Party's Central Committee and the whole Party", and on the other hand implies "establishing the guiding role of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era".
- According to an original provision of the PRC constitution, one individual can only hold the role of the president for a maximum of two five-year terms. This limit was eliminated by the National People's Congress in 2018, so Xi Jinping can be re-elected for one or more terms once his mandate expires. With regard to the position of true power, i.e. that of the general secretary, there had been no such limit in place, but an unwritten norm formulated under Deng Xiaoping dictated that holders of the position should not stay for more than two terms. This norm has obviously been violated by Xi Jinping.

All these efforts have proven to be successful: China has not had a leader as strong as Xi Jinping since Mao Zedong. This, however, does not mean that he has absolute

power, as real power depends on the extent to which the party elite is unified behind the leader. Even Xi cannot force his will on every interest group or faction, and the Chinese leadership is still far from being monolithic. Regardless of this, Xi's will seems to prevail in the most important questions.

Overall, these developments are justified by referring to the ongoing changes in the world, which, as it is often stressed by Xi Jinping, have been "unseen for a century" and due to which the future is full of uncertainties and possible hardships. According to this narrative, the PRC has stepped into the next era of development. In the first roughly three decades, under Mao's rule, a "New China" was established, and the political foundations were laid. During the next thirty-year period of reform and opening up, initiated by Deng Xiaoping, the country focused on economic development. In the "new era" *(xin shidai)*, China is facing unprecedented challenges, and in such circumstances, it needs a strong leader, who maintains a solid grip on power at the helm, and under whose leadership the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" *(Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing)* can be realised.

Strengthening party control

The reinstallation of the CCP's control over Chinese society and the economy is probably an even more important development than the expansion of Xi's personalistic rule. As already mentioned, by the end of the Hu Jintao era, many within the party were worried that the country would slip out of party control. That is probably why Xi Jinping embarked on strengthening the party with great impetus. With the help of centralization, a uniform ideology, and the anti-graft campaign, party discipline was consolidated, which entailed a more efficient implementation of central guidelines by local party organs. In the 1980s, a limited division of party and state work began to form under Deng Xiaoping: in theory, the guidelines were determined by the party and then implemented by the state. This trend was reversed under Xi Jinping, and the party has become directly involved in the management of almost all areas of life.

In state organs, institutions, and state-owned enterprises, which had, of course, always been under party control, the power of the unit's party committee has been expanded. As part of this process, the leading role of the CCP has been enshrined in the charters of some universities. State-owned enterprises, which became subject to tighter party control, have gained significant competitive advantages: they obtained easier access to procurement opportunities, preferential loans, and licenses, and they had the opportunity to simply buy up some of their privately owned competitors. For this reason, the decades-long process of the private sector gradually overshadowing the public sector was stopped. In traditional strategic sectors, the state had always preserved its dominance, but under Xi Jinping, it has increased its weight in many less important and newly formed areas.

In addition, party cells have been established in private companies, including those with foreign owners, where there had previously been none. These party organs then became actively involved in the functioning of the company. While in many cases, this has enhanced the lobbying capacities of the companies in the party instead of providing the party with a leading role in the company, the convergence of the CCP and the private sector has nevertheless intensified. In cases where the interests of the party leadership collide with that of a private company, there have even been spectacular

showdowns. The most famous example is the harsh measures related to Alibaba (halting the IPO of Ant Financial, the group's financial service provider, investigations, and fines), but many other private companies have also suffered a similar fate. Taken one by one, these actions could all be explained by anti-monopoly efforts, preventing the companies from limiting competition, or data privacy considerations, but the big picture they outline signals that the CCP will no longer tolerate attempts by private actors to become overly strong and independent. The Western media has interpreted all this as a general campaign against the private sector, but in reality, it has not been about ruining private companies but about keeping a closer eye on them and forcing them to act in accordance with the will of the party.

The increase in the influence of the party and the tighter monitoring of phenomena and actors that had been prone to slipping out of party control have been observable in all areas of life. Those who have tried to challenge the authority of the party in one way or another (human rights lawyers, feminist activists, etc.) have been imprisoned or threatened with imprisonment. The party-state has also strengthened its oversight of religions, which has entailed the dissolution or bringing under supervision of unregistered communities functioning in the grey zone between legality and illegality, as well as those that had ties to foreign communities. This set of measures does not amount to the full persecution of religions; it is rather about compelling religious communities to play by the rules set by the state and accept closer scrutiny.

Investigations have been launched against numerous stars and influencers (e.g. with accusations related to tax fraud), who were essentially apolitical but had a huge number of followers. The songs of certain artists have been deleted from the internet, and guidelines have been published on permissible cultural products (e.g. the portrayal of overly "feminine" males was banned). Most of these actions do not concern political issues directly, since voices critical of the party or the regime had never been tolerated, they are rather aimed at cultural patterns that represent imagined or real dangers to the social order, values, and morals, or those that are seen as tools of Western disruptive efforts.

All this also means that while during the 1990s and 2000s there was a conscious effort at making society more apolitical, everyday life has become (re)politicized under Xi Jinping; political slogans have appeared, and political goals were set in areas that had previously remained largely untouched by politics.

The latest technologies have also been used by the regime to strengthen party control. The Chinese internet has been censored since the 1990s, which became even more efficient during the 2010s. Artificial intelligence, facial recognition systems, and the fact that most Chinese people conduct many of their daily activities through their smartphones all provide the regime with tools of surveillance that were formerly unimaginable. Although the social credit system, which is frequently mentioned in the foreign press, is not much more than a myth (such a system does not exist in the form envisioned by the foreign press), the spectrum of options has nevertheless greatly expanded for the government.

The above-mentioned developments were significantly enhanced by the Covid-19 pandemic. In Chinese cities, every block and residential area has their neighbourhood committee under the oversight of the party, there is a party cell or committee at almost every workplace, and there are local committees in villages that can be mobilized as well. These were entrusted with the implementation of the restrictions and lockdowns introduced due to the pandemic. The system, which had not gone through such mobilization for decades, has gained substantial experience, has been renewed

and improved, and its efficiency has thus increased. During the pandemic, a mobile application had to be installed to use certain services, which allegedly tracked whether the individual had been exposed to infection; however, these applications also had other functions, such as preventing protests.

In parallel with strengthening the power of the party, attempts at integrating problematic peripheries into the Chinese system have been made, and separatist tendencies have been suppressed. Under the pretext of fighting terrorism (the bloodiest terrorist attack in modern Chinese history took place in 2014), Beijing launched a comprehensive and violent campaign in Xinjiang for the "re-education" of Uyghurs to make them accept a Chinese identity and eradicate any resistance. In Hong Kong, using the protests that had basically paralysed the city for many months as an excuse, laws were passed that eliminated freedom of speech, assembly, and association. Authorities in Inner Mongolia have restricted the use of the Mongolian language in schools. Under Xi Jinping, the so-called second-generation ethnic policies *(dierdai minzu zhengce)* have been introduced, which aim at creating a common culture and sense of identity, achieved through the use of force if necessary, instead of preserving the separate status of ethnic minorities, thereby accelerating nation-building. This does not mean the complete assimilation or the physical annihilation of minorities, but it entails an obligation to accept that they belong to a Chinese nation *(zhongzhua minzu)* that transcends ethnic divisions.

Anti-corruption campaign

One of the most important measures of Xi Jinping's first ten years was the launch of the anti-graft campaign, which is still ongoing today. Aiming to reach both "tigers and flies", i.e. national-level leaders accumulating millions in fortunes and petty officials accepting minor bribes, the campaign has had more than one goal. First, it has served as a tool for Xi Jinping and his circle to get rid of their political opponents. In the Chinese cultural context, which is traditionally built on mutual gifts, favours, ties of kinship, and friendship *(guanxi),* there is hardly a leading cadre who could not be accused of having been involved in bribery. Naturally, Xi has taken advantage of this in the power struggles. Second, the campaign has helped the restoration of party unity and discipline, and it has brought local potentates and interest groups who were operating extensive networks of business and corruption to heel. This has been essential in the successful execution of recentralization. Third, the actions against graft and extravagance have advanced the CCP's legitimacy and the public trust in it. Finally, Xi Jinping's personal popularity has also grown significantly due to the campaign. Using the classic political tool of populism, Xi portrays himself as a representative of the "common folk", a person who defies the corrupt elite and cleanses the apparatus of faulty elements.

During the campaign, 11.3 million cadres have received warnings, 4.7 million individuals have been brought under investigation for more serious crimes, and more than 1.5 million cadres have been convicted. The highest-ranking victim of the campaign was Zhou Yongkang, with whose conviction Xi broke the taboo of not calling to account former or present members of the Politburo Standing Committee, i.e. the narrowest circle of top officials. Zhou was one of the most powerful people in China under Hu Jintao, overseeing the key sector of internal security. Some top-ranking military leaders were also removed, such as Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong. Together with the fallen national

leaders, their networks of contacts, protégés, and associates were also removed, which has allowed Xi to fill up the positions with his loyalists. All this has come with great risk because Xi has harmed the interests of many and eliminated interest groups that were deeply embedded in the fabric of the party. Presumably, he needed the approval of those with significant informal influence in the party (i.e. the party elders or retired leaders) and the support of the majority of the current party leaders for all of this. Of course, the campaign has not eliminated corruption, but the most visible and irritating phenomena have been reduced, and even today, the possibility of an inquiry hangs above the head of any possible challenger of Xi as a sword of Damocles.

Conclusion

In 2012, Xi Jinping took over the top positions in a country that was characterized by the successes of the previous decades. However, he had to deal with several problems that largely defined his room for manoeuvre. These were partly related to the disruption of the balance between the central and the local powers, the decline of the influence of the party, which was fundamentally contrary to the party ideology, the infighting within the CCP, and the crumbling of its legitimacy. During his first decade in power, Xi Jinping re-established party control over the society and the economy, reinforced the CCP's power, discipline, and ideological unity, eliminated rival factions, and managed to build a one-man rule that had been unprecedented since Mao's reign. The question how these power tools were used to manage the most urgent

KKI POLICY BRIEF
Series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Publisher:

Author:
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Reviewed by:
TAMÁS PÉTER BARANYI

Language lecturer: Réka Futász | Typesetting: Tamás Lévárt

ISSN 2416-0148
https://doi.org/10.47683/KKIElemzesek.KE-2023.15

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