

# Special Forum

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## Uninterrupted Rise: China's Global Strategy According to Xi Jinping Thought

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To many in the Chinese leadership the global financial crisis revealed that advanced Western capitalist democracies are “paper-tigers.” This assessment led to growing voices questioning if Deng Xiaoping’s “hide and bide” dictum for foreign policy was still appropriate. Prior to Xi Jinping coming to power in late 2012 the Chinese leadership had no consensus on how to move forward beyond Deng. Questions pertaining to China’s long-term visions—such as what kind of power it should be, what type of international responsibilities it should and should not shoulder—were distracted by short-term calculations.<sup>1</sup> Under Xi China has developed a new global strategy, one of securing the uninterrupted rise of China, in contrast to the strategy of peaceful rise adopted by Hu Jintao, Xi’s predecessor.<sup>2</sup> At the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2017, Xi declared that China had entered a “new era” that would make the “great leap” from “standing up” (with the establishment of the PRC), through “getting rich” to “becoming strong.”<sup>3</sup>

The contrasts between peaceful rise and uninterrupted rise are stark. Hu sought to underplay China’s rise in propaganda. Xi touts it all the time. Two weeks after becoming the CCP general secretary, in November 2012, Xi hailed China’s rise as the “China Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”<sup>4</sup>—a clarion call to

the Party and the country. Hu never publicly committed to a timeline or criteria to measure China's rise. Xi has. At the 19th Party Congress, Xi promised to make China strong, rich, and, generally speaking, second to none by 2050.<sup>5</sup> By staking the CCP's legitimacy and that of his own power on China's rise, Xi ensured that making it uninterrupted becomes the Party's mission.

[This article sketches Xi's uninterrupted rise strategy](#) by a contextualized examination of his conceptualization of national rejuvenation and his intentions, as contained in his speeches and writings, which make up "Xi Jinping Thought on Chinese socialism for a new era" or "XJPT" for short. Even though XJPT has not yet subsumed Marxism-Leninism as China's ideology, in the way Mao Zedong Thought did from 1949 to 1976, it has become the most important source of guidance for China's statecraft. Moreover, since Xi has effectively ended the maximum ten-year tenure for China's top leader, he can be expected to stay in power for as long as he physically and politically can manage. Hence, what XJPT says illuminates China's global strategy for the next two decades or longer.

Based on a contextualized scrutiny of the widest possible selection of Xi's remarks from when he came to power, we found that there are four measures he uses to secure China's uninterrupted rise. They are:

- building up the core of China's "comprehensive national strength" by reinvigorating the CCP as an effective and efficient Leninist instrument;
- making the Chinese economy innovative via national champions and investments;
- making the Chinese people proud of their heritage and history, of which the CCP is portrayed as the standard bearer; and
- using economic leverages to persuade most countries to befriend or at least refrain from being "hostile" to China.

In what follows, we present Xi's remarks representative of his thinking in these areas to draw out the foundation of his strategy, which is premised on strengthening the party's resilience, state capacity, and a party-centric nationalism—and on these bases, developing China's foreign relations. We conclude with an overall assessment of the general manifestation of Xi's uninterrupted rise strategy and its implications for Chinese foreign policy.

### ***Building “comprehensive national strength” by reinvigorating the CCP***

As Xi asserted his authority as supreme leader when he embarked on his second term at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, he declared:

The Party, the state, the military, the civilians, and the education sector; east, west, south, north, and the center—the Party leads everything...As Chinese socialism has entered a new era, our party must have a new look and make new accomplishments. “It takes a tough blacksmith to make steel.” The Party must unite and lead the people to carry out the great struggle, push forward the great cause, and achieve the great dream. We must therefore uphold and perfect the Party's leadership and strengthen the Party unswervingly.<sup>6</sup>

The first and most important pillar in the XJPT approach to national rejuvenation is to make the CCP an effective and efficient Leninist instrument. Essentially, this means reinvigorating its Leninist characteristics—disciplined, centralized, committed to Marxism, and monopolizing leadership over everything, including foreign policy. While the CCP has always been a Leninist party, its discipline and effectiveness waned as it pursued post-Mao reforms.<sup>7</sup>

Xi believes that lax discipline was responsible for corruption, factional infighting, and all kinds of power abuses hindering China from building up “comprehensive

national strength” to reclaim its “rightful place” in the world. To Xi, “to be strict with party discipline, the first thing to be strict with is political discipline.”<sup>8</sup> This meant reviving “democratic centralism,” the Leninist principle of party organization that requires the whole party to submit ultimately to the Party Central. Xi’s twist is to conflate the Party Central with himself to achieve a high level of power centralization institutionally and personally. This is reflected clearly in a doctrine he introduced in September 2018, the “two upholds.” They exhort party members to: first, “resolutely uphold general party secretary Xi Jinping’s status as the Party Central’s and the whole party’s core;” and second, “resolutely uphold the Party Central’s authority and its centralized and unified leadership.”

The “two upholds” has been enforced via Xi’s relentless rectification-cum-anti-corruption drive, which is still on-going and had punished 2,650,000 cadres across all ranks between 2013–19.<sup>9</sup> In particular, Xi used the punishment against powerful leaders, including retired Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang, a handful of Politburo members, and senior generals, to “send shock waves” across the Party. With power concentrated in his hands, he uses the Party to galvanize the country to build up China’s strength across the board. Besides purging those deemed politically disloyal, Xi strengthens centralization by making prominent use of central leading small groups to carry out “top-level design” for all major policies and coordinate their implementation. In foreign policy, Xi retains ultimate control as head of the Party’s Central Foreign Affairs Commission though he also entrusts Politburo member Yang Jiechi, who works closely with him as secretary general of this powerful body, to superintend the work of the Foreign Minister.<sup>10</sup>

To build up “comprehensive national strength” Xi also reinvigorates Marxism-Leninism as the Party’s ideology. “Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Soviet Communist Party collapse? An important reason was that beliefs and ideals were shaken,”<sup>11</sup> said Xi soon after he took power. By emphasizing ideological

indoctrination within the Party Xi works to preempt the infiltration of liberal democratic ideas that may cause a “color revolution.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Xi takes a more assertive approach than his two predecessors and directs Chinese foreign policy “to make the world safe for authoritarian states,” which strikes a chord in many developing countries that are autocracies.<sup>13</sup>

### *Making Chinese economy innovative via national champions & investments*

“Indigenous innovative ability” is a prominent theme in Xi’s conceptualization of national rejuvenation. He longs for China to catch up with and outcompete advanced economies in technological capacity. Essentially, it is to achieve “what others have, I have; what others have, I am strong in; what others are strong in, I excel in.”<sup>14</sup> Xi believes that developing China’s indigenous innovative capacity is basic to national security. He told a group of distinguished Chinese scientists in June 2014:

Overall, our country’s foundation of technological innovation is not solid; our indigenous innovation ability, our original creativity in particular is not strong; our situation of being controlled by others when it comes to core technology in key areas has not been fundamentally changed. Only by grasping core technology in our own hands can we truly take the initiative to compete and develop, and to protect our national economic security, security in national defense, and security in other areas at a fundamental level. We cannot keep using others’ yesterday to decorate our tomorrow. We cannot keep relying on others’ technological achievements to enhance our technological standards. We must not be a vassal of other countries’ technology, forever trailing behind others. We have no other choice but to walk the new path of indigenous innovation.<sup>15</sup>

National security concerns aside, Xi attaches high strategic value for capitalizing on China’s “indigenous innovative ability” to advance its global leadership aspirations,

for which building up China's "comprehensive national strength" is essential. He added in the same speech:

At present, major technological breakthroughs and their accelerated application will most likely reshape the global economic structure and change the playing field for industrial and economic competition. In traditional playing fields, others have already set the rules—we can play, but we must follow pre-set rules, not having the ability to take initiatives. In order to seize the major opportunities in this new round of technological innovation and industrial transformation, we must join the construction of the new playing field from the beginning, and even lead the construction of some playing fields—it is such that we can become an important setter of new competition rules and an important dominator of new playing fields.<sup>16</sup>

What, exactly, are the international rules that Xi wants to make and how? Xi has not fleshed out the details. But he has made his preference known: international rules must fully respect the "national sovereignty" of each country, especially developing countries such as China. Xi said these countries are underrepresented in the "global order and global institutions," which badly needs to be "democratized."<sup>17</sup> This implies China seeks adjustments to the international regime to the advantage of the less wealthy states including itself, a position that appeals to the poorer and often autocratic states. Yet Chinese officials, at times, remind other states that their state is big and their counterpart is small, casting doubt on prospects for equality.

Where China has the edge, Xi makes the most of it. His government does not hesitate to seize first-mover advantage in an area like cyber governance, in which liberal democracies are hesitant to regulate—due not only to corporate opposition, but also to controversies from a human rights perspective. Xi is determined to transform China from a rule-taker to a rule-maker. To Xi, the extent to which China can

shape international rules on technology depends heavily on its technological clout. He thus strives to make the Chinese economy innovative via state industrial policies, including, famously, the “Made in China 2025” (MIC) strategy. This is designed to channel state investment and other forms of support to state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private firms in ten technology-intensive strategic sectors, to cultivate them into globally competitive “national champions.” MIC aspires the country to attain the ability to manufacture 40% of all core components and materials by 2020, reaching 70% by 2025. However, the 2020 target was missed, and non-official estimates suggest that the 2025 targets are unrealistic.<sup>18</sup> As long as China remains dependent on importing these technologies Xi will not pursue full economic or technological de-coupling with the advanced countries.

Consistent to the Marxist-Leninist approach to party-building, Xi called for the utilization of a “new-type of nationwide system” to overcome difficulties to China’s technological progress. He does not seek to build a new system, just to make full use of “the greatest advantage of Chinese socialist institutions”—namely, “the ability to concentrate efforts to do big things.”<sup>19</sup> In particular, this means playing up the already prominent role of SOEs, “making [them] strong, perfect, and huge.” This is because, Xi explained, the state sector provides “important material and political foundation for Chinese socialism.”<sup>20</sup> Beijing encourages the mergers of private firms into SOEs in order to strengthen the latter’s technological capacity. The policy document underpinning this, the “three-year action plan for state-owned enterprises reform” (2020–22), places “no upper limit” for such mergers.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, Xi sees making the Chinese economy innovative as a matter of state security no less than a pathway to national rejuvenation. Xi’s relentless pressure on corporations, especially SOEs, to achieve a high level of “indigenous innovative ability” quickly, strongly signals that he seeks to minimize, if not eliminate, China’s vulnerability to external pressures. This interpretation is supported by China’s ongoing

economic restructuring from export-oriented to consumption-driven growth, which Xi advocates in his “dual circulation strategy.” He adopted this approach in April 2020. He will get it incorporated into the 14th five-year plan at the National People's Congress scheduled for March 2021, to underscore the importance of relying on China's domestic market for economic resilience.<sup>22</sup> But this does not imply Xi will not continue to use China's economic leverage for its global ambitions.

### *Making the Chinese people proud of Chinese heritage and history, hence CCP leadership*

Xi seeks to rally the people around the Party by reinforcing party-centric nationalism, which asserts that the CCP is the sole legitimate heir and defender of Chinese heritage and history<sup>23</sup>—it is such that any person of Chinese descent should support the CCP's leadership. In a speech celebrating the 95th anniversary of the CCP's establishment on July 1, 2016, Xi said:

In today's world, if we are to ask which political party, country, and nation can be self-confident, then it's the Chinese Communist Party, the People's Republic of China, and the Chinese nation that have the most reasons to be self-confident. Endowed with the courage of being “self-confident one can live 200 years and swim 3,000 *li* [1,500 kilometers],” we can fearlessly face up to all difficulties and challenges and unswervingly open up new heaven and earth, and create new miracles.<sup>24</sup>

Xi's obsession with party-centric nationalism forecloses irreversibly liberal democratic reforms. At a national conference of party schools in December 2015, he said:

Since the end of the Cold War, some countries afflicted by Western values have been in turmoil: some torn to pieces, some plunged into wars, others are in a



constant state of disarray. If we tailor our practices to the Western capitalist value system or measure China's development against the Western capitalist evaluation system—in other words, upholding the Western standard as the sole standard, and repudiating deviations from it as backward and obsolete—I dread to contemplate the consequences! We will either trail behind slavishly or subject to abuse.<sup>25</sup>

At other party meetings, he contrasted the success of the ancient Chinese “state and governance system,” the noble virtues of which were allegedly preserved and refined by the CCP, with the failure of “constitutional monarchy, parliamentarism, multi-party politics, and presidentialism.”<sup>26</sup> Xi used his own take on Chinese history to Sinicize the Leninist regime: “The key to the preservation of our country's authority and character and our national self-esteem and independence is our independence in path, theories, and systems.” In other words, upholding the Leninist system (hence keeping to the “Chinese socialist path, theories, and systems”) as opposed to injecting liberal political reforms to it, is essential to China's national independence.<sup>27</sup>

Xi's promotion of Chinese history serves not only to legitimize the CCP's power monopoly, but also to inspire the nation to believe that China is pre-destined to restore its historic place as the world champion. This provides a kind of ideological underpinning for “wolf warrior” diplomacy. He explained in January 2016 why the Chinese should be proud:

The first industrial revolution that originated in England enabled England to ascend world hegemony. The United States seized the opportunity of the second industrial revolution and overtook England as the world champion...The Chinese nation is brave and good at innovation...[the English philosopher Francis Bacon once said](#): the invention of printing, gunpowder, and the compass [by China]

changed the face of the world—not one kingdom, religion, or individual influenced the cause of humanity greater than these three inventions.<sup>28</sup>

Xi is well-aware that, at least for the time being, not every Chinese are in tune with his party-centric nationalism or “wolf-warrior” diplomacy. He prescribed the United Front approach to persuade them. He said: “As long as we guard the center of the circle [that is, support for the CCP’s leadership], which is the political baseline, the radius of inclusion and diversity can be longer, and the concentric circle we can draw will be larger.”<sup>29</sup> Put differently, anyone who is critical of the CCP’s leadership must be won over or “harmonized.”

This policy of targeted repression applies not only to activists, dissidents, religious and ethnic minorities, but also to Chinese business leaders whose business empire is at the forefront of China’s technological advancement. This was evidenced in the suspension of the cutting-edge Ant Group’s \$37 billion IPO, which would have been the world’s largest, by the Shanghai Stock Exchange on November 3, 2020, 10 days after Jack Ma criticized China’s state banks and financial regulators in a high-profile public speech.<sup>30</sup> The underlying message is clear: if there is a clash, affirming his leadership takes precedence over everything. Xi also applies the United Front approach globally as he directs China to isolate its principal contradiction or enemy by rallying support from as many as possible and neutralizing those who cannot be won over.<sup>31</sup>

### *Using economic leverage to win friends and deter others*

Xi repeatedly underscores that China is committed to a “peaceful development path,” but this commitment is conditional on whether other countries respect China’s “core interests” or “legitimate rights and interests.” He said soon after becoming leader, in January 2013:

We are firmly committed to the path of peaceful development, but we must not give up on our legitimate interests. No country should expect us to trade off our core interests or to swallow the bitter fruit that undermines our state sovereignty, security, or development interests. China pursues the path of peaceful development, and other countries should also pursue the path of peaceful development. Only when all countries pursue the path of peaceful development can they develop together and co-exist peacefully.<sup>32</sup>

Xi reinforced this in July 2016:

China “opposes imposing one’s will on others, interfering in the domestic politics of other countries, and the strong bullying the weak...but will never sacrifice our legitimate rights and interests.... No country should expect us to trade off our core interests or to swallow the bitter fruit that undermines our state sovereignty, security, or development interests.”<sup>33</sup>

For China’s “core interests” or “legitimate rights and interests” Xi refers to “issues involving state sovereignty, territorial integrity, security, and stability,” very much in line with the formulation in place in post-Mao China.”<sup>34</sup> But they need to be contextualized against the “struggle mentality” XJPT promotes. It commands cadres to “resolutely struggle against all risks and challenges” that undermine:

- the CCP’s leadership and China’s socialist system;
- China’s sovereignty, security, and development interests;
- China’s core interests and major principles;
- the fundamental interests of the Chinese people;
- China’s attainment of the Two Centenary Goals; and
- the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.<sup>35</sup>

Xi cautioned cadres that these risks and challenges are “not short term, but rather, long term, and will accompany us for at least the whole duration of achieving the second centenary goal.”<sup>36</sup> He urged them to “harden [their] bones, dare to strike first and fight, and be sure to win... as, when we...wage struggles, we always run head-on toward contradictions, problems, risks, and challenges.”<sup>37</sup>

To Xi, the “struggle mentality” applies in foreign as much as domestic policies. It implies that XJPT’s global strategy consists of an expansive, and even open-ended, interpretation of what constitutes China’s “core interests” and “legitimate rights and interests.” Consequently, Xi puts aside Deng’s “hide and bide” dictum. To be sure, China turned assertive in the late Hu Jintao decade following the global financial crisis. But it was Xi who decisively ended the Dengist guideline. Key to Xi’s approach is to make routine use of China’s economic leverage to persuade others to support or refrain from being “hostile” to China. Intimidation is used whenever enticement is rejected or deemed inappropriate. Since Xi took power, China has punished a long list of democratic trading partners, including the Philippines, Japan, Taiwan, Mongolia, South Korea, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. It did so by abruptly blocking their exports to China, cutting supply of strategic imports from China, and/or suspending loan agreements, to force them to toe Beijing’s line.<sup>38</sup>

From Xi’s perspective, international condemnation of China’s economic coercion confirms the correctness of this hardline approach, even if it does not always lead to a change in behavior for the countries concerned. In April 2020, Xi said at an internal meeting:

We must...develop “assassin’s maces” [game changers] in the field of technology... tighten the dependence of the global industrial chains on China, so that we

can have a powerful counter-measure and deterrence at our disposal—that is, to cut off supply for foreign parties.<sup>39</sup>

As mentioned briefly, Xi is as prepared to use economic leverage to gain support as he is to intimidate those countries which resist enticement. Beijing regularly lavishes investment opportunities, financial aid, and technical assistance on countries it considers friends or potential friends, especially among less well-off autocracies. Most of these economic inducements are distributed through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and/or regional organizations that China dominates.<sup>40</sup> While Xi has said repeatedly that China does not interfere in other countries' "internal affairs," it does not imply Chinese aid and investment are unconditional. Xi consistently tells leaders of these countries that they should "support each other over their respective core national interests."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, although Xi has repeatedly said that China, as a "new-type of major power," would not form alliances," he expects the "vast number of developing countries" to be China's "natural allies in international affairs."<sup>42</sup> This applies particularly to China's territorial claims, the most important of which is Taiwan. China's international partners are expected to support its "one China principle" or at least not contest it.

## *Conclusion*

While XJPT has a clearly defined strategic goal—the "China Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2050—its uninterrupted rise global strategy is not equally clearly articulated. This is not because of intentional strategic ambiguity but because of inconsistencies among the four key drivers in XJPT. The primary focus on party-building and regime security implies both defensive and offensive dimensions. The relentless focus on consolidating the CCP's power reflects an inherent sense of insecurity and deep-seated mistrust of the West—though the objective of these obsessions is to enable China to build up its "comprehensive national

strength” as a self-confident and well-respected global leader. The strong emphasis laid on party-centric nationalism and Xi’s exaltations that Chinese officials must not hesitate to “unsheathe the sword” underpins the “wolf-warrior” approach to diplomacy.<sup>43</sup> But this contradicts Xi’s other requirement, namely that cadres should practice the United Front, not only at home but also abroad. As explained, this methodology calls for a delicate application of divide and rule—not the bluntness of the “wolf-warriors.”

Xi’s uninterrupted rise strategy focuses domestically on strengthening the party-state, and externally on engaging with the world to build up China’s “comprehensive national strength” as well as its global leadership. It means that China will continue to strive to make the Chinese economy innovative and not vulnerable to external pressure by increasingly shifting from an export-oriented to a domestic consumption dependent model. In practical terms it amounts to a kind of smart (but not full) decoupling and tactical acceptance of the liberal world order: China supports globalization insofar as it enables Chinese industries to acquire advanced technologies to make themselves innovative and world-leading. The Party not only blocks China from ideas and influences it deems undesirable, but also actively attempts to make new international rules to protect the regime security of autocracies. Whether China is a reformist or revisionist power depends on the perception of the observer. What is certain is that China is not a status quo power. While China is already posing as the US’s peer competitor, it is not trying to replace the US as the top-dog now and will refrain from doing so until it is ready—by 2050 at the latest. This is likely to happen rather sooner. When Xi decides China has the capabilities to take Taiwan and deter the US from interfering he will use force though his preference is to intimidate Taipei into submission without an actual invasion. Taking Taiwan will mark the fulfilment of Xi’s “China Dream,” as it can only be achieved by deterring or defeating the US.<sup>44</sup>

Hence, XJPT will likely shape China's foreign policies in three main directions in the foreseeable future:

- China proactively engaging with the rest of the world via the BRI, vaccine diplomacy and support (which can be moral and/or material) for authoritarian states, in order to reduce, if not eliminate the risk democratic ideas may pose to the CCP;
- China assertively putting its narrative across through its expansion of Chinese media and diplomatic presence globally and countering negative portrayals of China; and
- China playing a leading role in reshaping international organizations and rules by proactively securing leadership and other key positions in international organizations for citizens of China or friendly states.

In short, while claiming that pragmatism and engagement with the rest of the world will remain the mainstay of Xi's uninterrupted rise strategy, these claims are qualified by zero tolerance of any act that may "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people" or "the dignity of China."<sup>45</sup> In plain English, this means that anything that tarnishes the image of China generally or its leader in particular will receive a robust response from the Chinese government. Such responses have become unavoidable, rendering the prospects of priority for pragmatism and positive engagement increasingly doubtful. International backlashes to Chinese assertiveness are unlikely to deter China, as Xi has already made it clear that the "risks and challenges" to national rejuvenation are bound to be many and ever so complex.<sup>46</sup> He will use XJPT to steer China to rise until he achieves the goals he has set for 2050.

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27. *Ibid.*, p. 12. The fact that Marxism and Leninism were imported from Europe is deliberately downplayed, as they have now been "Sinicized."

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38. Bonnie S. Glaser, "Time for Collective Pushback Against China's Economic Coercion," CSIS, January 13, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/time-collective-pushback-against-chinas-economic-coercion>. Accessed February 9, 2021.

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40. See, for example, Xi Jinping, *Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng disan juan*, pp. 456-69, 480-85; Xi Jinping, *Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng*, pp. 303-10, 313-20.

41. Xi Jinping, *Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng dier juan*, p. 10.

42. Xi Jinping, *Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng disan juan*, p. 429.

43. *Ibid.*, 227.

44. This is strongly suggested in Xi's speeches on Taiwan, *Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng*, pp.230-43.

45. See David Bandurski, "Why So Sensitive? A Complete History of China's 'Hurt Feelings,'" *Hong Kong Free Press*, January 29, 2016, <https://hongkongfp.com/2016/01/29/why-so-sensitive-a-complete-history-of-chinas-hurt-feelings/>. Accessed February 18, 2021.

46. Xi Jinping, *Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng disan juan*, p. 226.

 Post Views: 494

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## Tag

Comprehensive national strength

Joe Biden

United Front

US-China rivalry

Wolf Warrior Diplomacy

Xi Jinping

Xi Jinping Thought

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