

Authors' Response: Policy Implications of Xi Jinping Thought for China and the World

Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung

We are grateful to David Lampton, Kerry Brown, Jessica Teets, and Yan Bennett for their insightful reviews of our book. It is gratifying to see many of our research findings and conclusions confirmed by these colleagues' admirably well-grounded independent research. They have also raised interesting questions that we encountered in our research but excluded from the book for reasons of length or tightness of organization. We appreciate that they have raised them so we can engage on them here.

An obvious starting point regards the role that Wang Huning has played in putting together Xi Jinping Thought raised by Lampton and Brown. We would go further and expand this to consider Wang and his support staff in their contribution to the evolving contents of Xi Thought. While Wang is the lead contributor (other than Xi himself), he is not the only one.

Lampton and Brown are, of course, right that Xi Thought does in some ways represent a collective party consensus, particularly on basic notions like prioritizing regime security, party-centric nationalism, and developing stronger technological and economic self-reliance. This does not, however, mean all leaders, let alone the nearly 100 million members of the Chinese Communist Party, fully support it. The lack of opposition to Xi and Xi Thought within the party does not imply that there is no dissent or dissatisfaction. The existence of the latter has become unmissable as the economy has slowed down since the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is true that Wang and his staff have drafted documents released in Xi's name. As we explain (p. 33), every document issued in Xi's name has been approved by Xi and represents what he would like included in Xi Thought. Wang and the staff have drafted them on the basis of what Xi would approve, undoubtedly adding color to Xi's speeches. Introducing ideas that Xi disapproves of, however, would amount to committing career suicide. It is not something a scholar turned party apparatchik who rose spectacularly in career terms after serving two top leaders with different outlooks would do.

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Wang's record shows his contributions to Jiang Zemin's doctrine of "the three represents" and Hu Jintao's "scientific outlook" propelled his political career. With Xi Thought heading in nearly the opposite direction of "the three represents," the weight of evidence points to Wang being an expert in second-guessing what the top leaders want.

Brown has raised the important question of whether the people of China actually understand Xi Thought. He is right that in this book we have shown that Xi Thought is complex and thus perhaps not readily understandable to the average person. But its complexity does not make it impossible for people in China to embrace it as a proto-ideology. The key here is to make the distinction between understanding Xi Thought for all that it entails and its readiness for indoctrination. For mass indoctrination, Xi Thought can be and is reduced to catchphrases, like "east, west, south, north, and center—the party leads everything." Since Xi Thought is about the fulfillment of "the China dream of national rejuvenation," "upgrading" the *de facto* social contract, and upholding the leadership of Xi, its slogans are readily relatable to Chinese people. The mission of the party's powerful propaganda machinery is to guide people to embrace these slogans (see chapter 6). The complexity of Xi Thought does not negate its indoctrination potential.

As we show in chapter 7, Xi Thought can even appeal to foreigners, such as Xi's declaration that China is working for "the democratization of international relations" in his promotion of "the common destiny for humankind." The same applies to concepts like "state sovereignty, security, and development interest." And he makes these notions attractive both by using the Belt and Road Initiative to dish out development assistance that would be otherwise unavailable and by reassuring autocratic leaders in the global South via his Global Civilization Initiative that China supports them in retaining the right to govern however they wish. Xi makes it easier for leaders of countries in the global South to accept these ideas by avoiding describing them as tenets of Xi Thought, but they are.

This leads to the suite of important questions Lampton has raised about the implications of Xi Thought on engagement with China, focusing in particular on U.S.-China relations. We agree with his implication that the assertive or aggressive defense of sovereignty in Xi Thought does not bode well for this relationship.

On Lampton's specific question of whether Washington has managed Xi's party-centric nationalism effectively, we take the view that it has not. The book is meant to help policymakers in Washington and elsewhere

understand and recognize what really underpins Xi's ambition and approach to the world as well as within China. Our research shows that Xi does not seek to replace the United States as the global hegemon in the existing liberal international order. Xi's ambition is to recreate the *tianxia* international order by transforming the liberal international order from within, a strategic goal to be completed by 2049–50. There is nothing other countries can do to change his ambition.

But there is scope to frustrate Xi in his quest. To achieve this transformation, Xi needs China to not only out-compete the United States but also gain support from the global South. China has already been highly successful in securing backing from countries in the global South to change how key institutions of the United Nations operate. To counter that, the United States should compete with China in the global South in the spirit of a beauty contest, making what it represents more attractive and preferable to what China offers. This is not insurmountable as Xi's approach is inherently a China-first one, and Washington can put the interests of the global community ahead and contrast them against Beijing's Sinocentric bias.

As for U.S.-China bilateral relations, Lampton is right to suggest Washington should engage in a way that does not aggravate destructive Chinese nationalism. Diplomacy and engagement are most needed when peer competitors are on a trajectory toward a direct confrontation. Washington must persist in engagement or war will become unavoidable. What our book has revealed is that ultimately what matters most to Xi is his hold on power, even ahead of fulfilling the China dream. This is critical, as it reveals the most effective way to get Xi to change his mind. Whether Xi opts for continued cooperation or war with the United States depends on his calculation of which will ensure his hold on power, followed by what will deliver China's rise to global preeminence. Since China's economy is still significantly behind that of the United States, Washington has plenty of cards to play. Xi is aware that he needs to engage with the United States until China is ready to make the China dream come true. What Washington needs to focus on is engaging China constructively without significantly or disproportionately enhancing Chinese might. Full decoupling puts the two countries on a trajectory of intensifying competition leading toward war.

On China's global approach, Bennett has helpfully reminded us that Xi's ambition to "restore China's ancient glory and reshape international relations" is not only driven by "a combination of regime security, national pride, and a desire to assert China's influence globally," but also is "a way to stand up to bullies of the world and assert uncontested dominance." The last

element is indeed an important part of Xi's thinking, as China's outreach to the global South is more effective when presented in such language. Poorer states that were former colonies of the West generally respond well to rhetoric of this kind, as do people in China already indoctrinated with the "century of humiliation" narrative. But the use of anti-bully rhetoric does not change the reality that China's overbearing approach to some of its neighbors is bullying from the perspective of those at the receiving end. All in all, contemporary China's global strategy remains driven primarily by Xi's ambition and Xi Thought.

Teets has highlighted the importance of the "upgraded" *de facto* social contract in Xi Thought (chapter 4). We are pleased to have her confirmation that "our understanding of common prosperity corresponds with [her] own analysis." While we share her astute observation that the "common prosperity" program is part of the upgraded social contract, we also take the view that Xi's approach reveals more of the limitation to what "common prosperity" really entails as socialism. The lack of significant government reform to revamp the social welfare system, when compared to the outpour of state investment in emerging technologies, and set in the context of how much Xi has enhanced the Chinese Communist Party's control over government institutions across the board, shows the limits of Xi's commitment to common prosperity. With its Leninist system revitalized, China is now in a strong position to implement socialist policies generally. Yet, it falls far short of doing so. Xi's common prosperity program is not about socialist redistribution or moving toward "from each according to ability...to each according to needs." What Xi has delivered are some tangible benefits that show his brand of consultative politics. We document some examples in chapters 4 and 6 and Teets mentioned others drawn from her fieldwork. These are reminders that despite the Leninist impulses of Xi Thought, the mass line, or using pseudo-consultation to rally people to the party, is still important. It underpins our thinking as to why it is appropriate to modify the "consultative Leninism" framing to "Sino-centric consultative Leninism" rather than replace it with a new analytical framework. The adaptability of the Xi regime should not be underestimated despite the move toward a more totalitarian direction.

Last but not least, Lampton has a crucial question about how strong or resilient the system Xi has put in place is. We previously addressed this point in an article published separately, as we preferred the book focus on

what Xi Thought is and what it is not.¹ We thought a long analysis of the resilience of the Xi approach may lead some readers to wonder if we have an agenda behind this project—a potential distraction we preferred to avert. But we did mention in the book’s concluding chapter that however much Xi has reinvigorated the Leninist system and guided China to develop in a totalitarian direction, he has also generated fault lines and created problems. One of them has been picked up by Teets, whose research confirms that Xi’s approach has backfired by creating incentives for officials to avoid taking initiative as making no mistake is the safer career bet. What our article shows is that by unrelentingly consolidating the party’s power and putting himself at the center of everything, Xi has strengthened the Chinese party-state’s capacity to act promptly and decisively to stamp out challenges in the short term, but this has weakened the party’s long-term durability. For what it is worth, the collective leadership and orderly succession arrangements put in place by Deng Xiaoping and upheld under Jiang and Hu enhanced regime resilience in the longer term. By replacing them with his strongman rule, Xi has weakened the party’s resilience when biology weakens his grip or when he finally passes away. ◆

¹ Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, “Has Xi Jinping Made China’s Political System More Resilient and Enduring?” *Third World Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2022): 225–43.