



CHINA AEROSPACE
STUDIES INSTITUTE

XI JINPING:
LINES OF AUTHORITY



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Acronyms

CCDI	Central Commission for Discipline Inspection
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	Chinese Central Television
CMC	Central Military Commission
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
EDD	Equipment Development Department
GAD	General Armaments Department
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IPR	Intellectual Property Rights
LSG	Leading Small Group
MCF	Military-Civil Fusion
NPC	National People's Congress
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SASTIND	State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise

Key Findings

XI'S PERSONAL ACCUMULATION OF POWER SUPERCEDES RECENT CHINESE LEADERS

- As General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping has consolidated power to an extent not seen since Deng Xiaoping. Many believe that the former upper echelons of the CCP preferred a rule-by-consensus model, however, Xi has instead made many changes to the organizations under his authority which may allow him to increase his personal power to a level not seen in decades.. While Xi holds the same official positions as his predecessor, Hu Jintao, this apparent consolidation of power demonstrates that Xi potentially wields much greater authority.
- His abolition of constitutional term limits for the presidency, tightened control over China's security organizations, and numerous propaganda drives have all further supported this effort to consolidate power.
- Xi has also used the power to make personnel appointments strategically to place allies in key positions at all levels of the Party State.

XI IS USING ANTI-CORRUPTION BODIES TO REMOVE OPPONENTS OF REFORMS

- Xi is following a pattern of instigating anti-corruption probes, making structural changes to improve said anti-corruption efforts, and rolling out of difficult reforms across Party, State and Military bodies.
- He has also consolidated the anti-corruption bodies through the consolidation of State bodies under the National Supervision Commission and its merger of duties with the Party's Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection (CCDI)

XI IS USING LEADING SMALL GROUPS TO DIRECTLY SUPERVISE A WIDE RANGE OF POLICIES

- Xi has the use of Leading Small Groups (LSG) and Commissions within the CCP Central Committee and Central Military Commission (CMC) to set the political agenda. While LSGs existed before Xi's leadership, his creation of a larger number of them with oversight over a diverse set of portfolios stands out among his predecessors.
- The size of the LSGs is also larger than before, including a greater number of relevant policymakers. Xi's personal involvement ensures that his particular policies are being implemented across a wide range of topics.

Introduction

Xi Jinping is the undisputed top leader of China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Chinese media. He regularly appears on the front pages of Chinese newspapers, has phone applications dedicated to “Xi Jinping Thought,” has dedicated sections for his speeches present on many Chinese internet portals, and bears the hallmarks of growing cult of personality. This omnipresence stands in stark contrast to Xi’s immediate predecessors, who preferred the General Secretaryship as a position closer to a “first among equals.” This study is an attempt to characterize the various lines of authority Xi wields within the Chinese system and his goals for accumulating them. It does this by examining organizational changes, promotional practices, political campaigns, and the use of ad-hoc small groups of senior leaders. This study builds on work by several scholars and think-tanks, including work on Leading Small Groups from Alice Miller, the China Leadership Monitor, and the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), expanding on their work using the latest available Chinese-language sources.¹

Thus, to better understand Xi’s authority as wielded through titles, campaigns, and Leading Small Groups (LSGs), this study takes a broad scope to Xi Jinping’s authority and understanding how his political power has been utilized since his assumption of Party and state leadership in 2012 and 2013, respectively. While previous scholarship represents an impressive foundation, available works on LSGs appear to focus on descriptions of their membership and predicted function, and often fail to account for their broader utility within China’s political system. Therefore, this study will both provide context for the LSGs by connecting them with political campaigns, as well as explore their use as a supplement to Xi’s official powers. Primarily, Xi Jinping’s authority comes from three titles: General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party[总书记], Chairman of the Central Military Commission [军委主席], and President of the People’s Republic of China [国家主席].

As the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi has authority over Party structure and the decision-making Central Committee and its Politburo. The Central Committee houses the Secretariat, the General Office, and numerous commissions and Leading Small Groups. At the pinnacle of the Party structure, Xi has broad authority to create commissions for his strategic initiatives, undercut rivals’ power bases through organizational changes, and set a nation-wide agenda for implementation by lower levels of the Party bureaucracy. As Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Xi has authority over the CCP’s armed forces: the People’s Liberation Army, the People’s Armed Police, and the Militia. This authority bestows broad capabilities for Xi to restructure the organizations, control the budget afforded the armed forces, and direct the military in situations of conflict. As President of the People’s Republic of China, Xi also has authority on a macro-level over China’s state administration. This position affords him the ability to appoint the Premier and State Council Ministers, declare war, promulgate laws, and declare a national state of emergency. Beyond these formal titles, Xi also holds numerous informal titles meant to invoke Mao Zedong [毛泽东] and the first generation of CCP leadership (such as Great Helmsman and People’s Leader) which signal his centrality to the modern CCP.

Xi also holds numerous positions at the head of various commissions and leading small groups. Acting as an important subset of his primary titles, the leadership of these organizations grants him the ability to coordinate between various ministries, counterparts, and stakeholders. Further, these organizations typically publish guidelines, plans, and opinions that are expected to be taken up by the various segments of the Party and relevant ministries. Through these methods, positions, and the authority granted therein, Xi Jinping wields considerable

power over both Party organizations and orientation.

In the following sections, this report describes the nature of China's political system, how Xi advanced through that system, and the positions he currently holds. The second section follows how Xi has exercised his authority through the use of appointments, investigations, reforms, and political campaigns. The third section examines CCP Central Committee Leading Small Groups and how Xi has used them to push both his authority and his vision of a Chinese national rejuvenation.

The Foundations of Xi's Authority

This section provides an overview of how political power is wielded in China, Xi's rise through the ranks, and subsequently how he has accumulated both formal and informal titles to effectively wield that authority.

Overview of Political Authority in China

The Chinese Communist Party is the dominant political power within the People's Republic of China. While there are other minor political parties, they are constitutionally subordinate to the CCP, serving to improve engagement with sectors of society as part of the United Front.ⁱ Because of this, the CCP ultimately controls the avenues to advancement within the PRC. Further, due to the Party's centrality and dominance over the Chinese state, there exist dual tracks of authority running both through the Party and through the state that it oversees. Many Ministries within the State Council have mirror organizations within the CCP Central Committee with similar responsibilities that they frequently partner with.ⁱⁱ While they are officially separate bodies, decisions tend to come from the Party to then be enacted by the State.²

The National People's Congress [中华人民共和国全国人民代表大会] (NPC) is China's highest legislative body with the authority to appoint the president, enact national-level laws, and set the agenda for country-wide policy priorities. Representatives in the NPC are elected from provincial-level People's Congresses, who are themselves elected from county-level People's Congresses. The NPC meets yearly and features nearly 3,000 representatives.³

However, despite how things are organized by law, the fundamental control of the state comes ultimately through the directives and appointments made by the CCP. Every five years, the Chinese Communist Party's National Party Congress [中国共产党全国代表大会] meets to elect the new members of the Central Committee [中央委员会].⁴ The Central Committee is tasked with electing the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, the Central Military Commission, the Politburo [中央政治局], and the Politburo Standing Committee [中央政治局常委]. As of 2017's 19th Party Congress, the Central Committee consists of 204 members and holds plenary sessions at least once a year to announce policy decisions.⁵ Twenty-five members from the Central Committee are chosen to form the Politburo, which has significant clout in terms of policy and agenda-setting. Finally, the CCP Politburo Standing Committee is chosen from the ranks of the Politburo. The Standing Committee is currently comprised of seven members with the general secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping, as their head. The other members of the Standing Committee are typically heads of various ministries, departments, and commissions, and possess an informal ranking within the Standing Committee.⁶

i The United Front [统一战线] is a CCP political concept that involves unifying the various social classes, religious and ethnic groups as well as political organizations for China's rejuvenation, all under the guidance of the CCP. See: "Regulations for the United Front Work of the Communist Party of China" [中国共产党统一战线工作条例], *People's Daily* [人民日报], 6 January 2021. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0106/c64387-31990220.html>

ii This dual structure, with the same membership and two separate titles (one Party, one State) is a regular feature of the Chinese political system and typically described as "one organization, with two titles" [一个机构两块牌子] or similar iterations.

However, while the CCP Central Committee sets the agenda and broad governmental strategies, as a Party structure, the CCP Central Committee does not necessarily contain the ministries and offices that have the authority to do most of the work. Rather, that is found on the governmental side of the equation in an umbrella organization called the State Council [国务院]. Traditionally, the head of the State Council, the Premier [总理], holds the second-ranked position on the CCP Politburo Standing Committee. Within the State Council lie the Chinese government's many departments and ministries: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Defense, the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Public Security, and the People's Bank of China, among many others.⁷ The Vice-Premiers and State Councilors under the Premier are traditionally concurrent members of the CCP Central Committee.

Further, the CCP contains several powerful organizations and important internal bodies: the Central Secretariat [中央书记处], the Organization Department [中组部], and Central Committee General Office [中央办公厅], among others. The Secretariat is charged with carrying out the on-the-ground operations through the Party. Typically, this is done through coordinating between departments and commissions and handling the daily tasks of operations.⁸ In turn, the CCP Organization Department functions similarly to the human resources departments of other organizations: placing people in positions, formalizing promotions, and maintaining personnel information.⁹ Because of this, the CCP Organization Department wields considerable power as the ultimate organization responsible for one's career path. Likewise, the Central Committee General Office handles the high-level administration for the Central Committee, including issuing internal memos, setting evaluation metrics for cadres, creating intraparty regulations, and basic logistical work for party meetings and conferences.¹⁰ Within the Central Committee, there also exist numerous departments and commissions that frequently partner with their State Council equivalents and coordinate to keep Party and State focused and consistent.ⁱⁱⁱ Xi's earliest moves to consolidate power focused on these organs, including the CCP Central Propaganda Department [中央委员会宣传部] and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection [中央纪律检查委员会].

The CCP also directly controls its armed forces including the People's Liberation Army [解放军] (PLA) and the People's Armed Police [武警] (PAP) through the Central Military Commission (CMC).¹¹ There are technically two Central Military Commissions: the Communist Party CMC, and the People's Republic of China CMC. However, they are functionally identical as they contain the same members and rarely meet as the State CMC.¹² The CMC Chairman, Xi Jinping, serves as Commander-in-Chief of the PLA and has overall authority over deployments, organization, leadership appointments, and military spending. With the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China serving concurrently as the Chairman of the CMC, this structure ensures both Party and civilian control over the military forces of China.

While Chinese leaders have followed a series of paths to power (involvement in the revolution, military service, family patronage, factional allegiance, or the Party's talent pipelines such as the Communist Youth League [共青团]), the Chinese government has repeatedly attempted to standardize this system by applying key performance indicators (KPIs) and other more neutral metrics for evaluating and promoting officials.¹³ However, typically, officials rise through the ranks of the CCP by performing their functions well, displaying loyalty to the Party, and finding a patron or faction.^{iv} Then, often, Party members are assigned positions within China's civilian

iii Examples include the Central Cyberspace Affairs LSG and the State Cyberspace Administration of China, the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission and the PRC Ministry of Justice, or the Central Propaganda Department and the National Press and Publication Administration

iv In the parallel Party-State structure the leader of the state administrative level (province, municipality, prefecture, county, township, or village etc) is subordinate to the Secretary of the respective Party Committee. Thus, often patronage revolves around the local Party Committee Secretary, not necessary the civilian administrators.

state administration. as civil servants after passing the civil service exam. There are, however, many paths to power. Rising through the Communist Party ranks will typically result in positions with greater authority over the state apparatus. Likewise, demonstrating expertise in a civilian appointment may help one garner attention from Party patrons.

Xi's Path to Power

Xi Jinping's rise through the ranks of the CCP can be divided into five phases: his early years, Fujian positions, Zhejiang positions, his Central Committee membership, and finally his tenure as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China.¹⁴

Born in 1953 as the son of a senior Chinese Communist Party official, Xi Jinping's youth was shaped by the upheaval and zeal of the Cultural Revolution. He was sent to the countryside in 1969, a few years after his father's purge from the CCP in 1963. Despite the trauma suffered by his upper-echelon family, Xi joined the Communist Party of China in 1974.¹⁵ For the first three years of his career, he served adjacent to power as a secretary to Geng Biao [耿飚] (then Vice-Premier and Secretary General of the CMC General Office) within the General Office of the Central Military Commission and the State Council. However, in 1982 Xi Jinping left Beijing to work in Zhengding County [正定县], Hebei province as a Deputy Secretary to the local Party committee. Following this, in 1983 Xi received three promotions to become Commissar and Party Committee First Secretary of the Zhengding County Military Affairs Department [武装部] during his time as Deputy Secretary of Zhengding County Party Committee [委员会]¹⁶. During this time he seems to have had more involvement in defense matters than other recent leaders and displayed a strong interest in national defense affairs.

After three years at this position, Xi moved to Xiamen [厦门市], Fujian province in 1985. Xi would spend a total of 17 years in Fujian moving up the ranks of the provincial Communist Party and gaining his first experience in State leadership positions. In his first appointment, Xi was positioned as the Vice-Mayor of Xiamen, a rapidly developing coastal metropolis, while concurrently serving as a Standing Committee member on the CCP Xiamen Municipal Committee [厦门市委].¹⁷ Throughout his time in Fujian, his rise through the Party ranks was supplemented with appointments on military committees. In 1988 he joined the Ningde Military Sub-Region Party Committee [宁德军分区党委] as the first secretary; in 1992 he would continue to the Fuzhou Military Sub-region Party Committee [福州军分区党委], eventually serving as the political officer for a Reserve Anti-aircraft Artillery Division in Fujian [福建省高炮预备役师第一政委] and joining the Fujian Provincial National Defense Mobilization Committee [福建省国防动员委员会]. Meanwhile, Xi continued to work his way up the Party apparatus and eventually landed an appointment as governor of Fujian province. Besides his time as Vice-Mayor of Xiamen, this was his first time in a position of authority within the civilian state government.

The governorship of Fujian would immediately be followed by a position as acting governor of Zhejiang and numerous other civil-military positions as Xi continued to rise through the Party ranks and join the Central Committee in 2002. Xi would continue to rise through the Party and State structures in the early 2000s, culminating in his joining the CCP Politburo Standing Committee in 2007 and becoming Hu Jintao's [胡锦涛] heir apparent as Vice-President in 2008. Xi's career tended to follow the route of rising through the Party first, and afterwards serving in positions of civilian administration. This trend would serve as a precursor to Xi's emphasis on Party primacy as General Secretary. Further, Xi Jinping's professional track appears to follow closely with his Cultural Revolution-era roots as a strong believer in the power and capability of the Party as the main vessel to serve the

Chinese state.

However, there are many avenues to power. While Xi rose to prominence in the wealthy, coastal provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian, his predecessor, Hu Jintao, began making a name for himself in the disadvantaged Western provinces. Originally working as a hydroelectric engineer, Hu entered the civil service as a secretary for China's Hydroelectric Power Ministry [水电部]. Eventually, he worked his way up the ranks by working through party committees on construction projects in rural Gansu province. Over time, he made a name for himself in the Communist Youth League of China, spending five years ascending the ranks of the Youth League leadership, joining the Central Committee, and becoming the Chairman of the All-China Youth Federation [全国青年联合会] in 1982. From 1985-1992 Hu then worked in Guizhou and Tibet before joining the CCP Politburo Standing Committee in 1992. This sudden appointment to the CCP Politburo Standing Committee was supported by Deng Xiaoping [邓小平] as preparation for Hu's succession of Jiang Zemin [江泽民].¹⁸ Ten years later in 2002, he would become the General Secretary of the CCP and the national leader of the People's Republic of China.¹⁹

Xi Jinping had family connections, which helped to acquire positions and titles within the Communist Party, before being appointed to governing positions in the civil service. This allowed him to gain a name in political circles prior to acquiring first-hand state administrative experience. In general, Xi's path since becoming the leader of China has mirrored his rise to prominence: a focus on building the Party internally instead of the Chinese State apparatus, and an interest in modernizing and reforming the PLA. In contrast, Hu Jintao started with specialist expertise working on hydroelectric power projects and working his way up rural provincial party committees, before finding patronage from Deng Xiaoping and support with a Party seeking stable leadership and regular succession. However, both men had connections to existing leadership, either through family history or by cultivation.

Table 1: Xi Jinping's Career

Dates	Title/Position	Organization	
1974	Member of the Chinese Communist Party	Chinese Communist Party (CCP)	Hebei Province
1979-1982	Secretary	State Council and Central Military Commission, General Office	
1982-1983	Deputy Secretary	Zhengding County, CCP Committee	
1983-1985	Secretary	Zhengding County, CCP Committee	
1983-1985	First Commissar and Party Committee First Secretary	Zhengding County, Military Affairs Department	
1985-1988	Standing Committee Member	Xiamen Municipal CCP Committee	Fujian Province
1985-1988	Vice-Mayor	Xiamen City	
1988-1990	Secretary	Ningde Prefectural CCP Committee	
1988-1990	First Secretary	Ningde Military Sub-region, CCP Party Committee	
1990-1996	First Secretary	Fuzhou Military Sub-region, CCP Party Committee	
1990-1996	Standing Committee Chairman	Fuzhou Municipal People's Congress	
1990-1996	Secretary	Fuzhou Municipal CCP Committee	
1993-1995	Standing Committee Member	Fujian Provincial CCP Committee	
1995-2002	Deputy Secretary	Fujian Provincial CCP Committee	
1996-2002	First Commissar	Fujian Provincial Anti-aircraft Artillery Reserve Division	
1999-2003	Deputy Director	Nanjing Military Region, National Defense Mobilization Committee	
1999-2002	Director	Fujian Provincial National Defense Mobilization Committee	
1999-2000	Acting Governor	Fujian Province	
2000-2002	Governor	Fujian Province	
2002-2007	Member	(16 th) CCP Central Committee	Zhejiang Province
2002-2003	Acting Governor	Zhejiang Province	
2002-2003	Director	Zhejiang Provincial National Defense Mobilization Committee	
2002-2002	Deputy Secretary	Zhejiang Provincial CCP Committee	
2002-2007	Secretary	Zhejiang Provincial CCP Committee	
2002-2007	First Secretary	Zhejiang Provincial Military Region CCP Committee	
2003-2007	Standing Committee Chairman	Zhejiang Provincial People's Congress	
2007	Secretary	Shanghai Municipal CCP Committee	Central Committee
2007	First Secretary	Shanghai Garrison Command CCP Committee	
2007-2012	Standing Committee Member	CCP Politburo (Central Committee, Politburo Standing Committee)	
2007-2012	Member	(17 th) CCP Central Committee Secretariat	
2007-2012	President	Central Party School	
2008-2013	Vice-President	People's Republic of China	
2010-2013	Vice-Chairman	Central Military Commission	
2012-Present	General Secretary	CCP Central Committee	National Leadership
2013-Present	President	People's Republic of China	
2013-Present	Chairman	Central Military Commission	

Xi's Titles And Their Significance

Formal Government Positions

General Secretary:

While typically referred to in English media by his State title of President, Xi's most important title is undoubtedly General Secretary. This position affords Xi Jinping the very top of the Chinese political pyramid and grants authority as the head of the CCP Central Committee.²⁰ The General Secretary sets the goals, programs, tone, and overall direction of the Party while wielding a significant amount of personal and political authority due to the cultural norms within the CCP.

In real terms, much of Xi's authority comes from both CCP insistence on the appearance of unity and his ability to directly structure the Communist Party's departments. After making speeches and policy announcements, directives spread quickly through the ranks and offices, with guidelines issued, news broadcast, and up-and-comers scrambling to recite the latest ideological campaign.²¹ As an exercise of strength, "Xi Jinping Thought" [习近平思想] was officially added to the Party constitution in 2017. Meanwhile, through his authority over the Central Committee, Xi can create new Party departments and commissions, and rearrange heads of office to fit his agenda and implement his policy directions. As will be discussed in later sections, Xi used his General Secretary position to restructure the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, create new Leading Small Groups, and help push through the constitutional abolition of presidential term limits.

Chairman of the Central Military Commission:

No amount of political legitimacy matters for China's top leaders without the backing of the military. The position of Chairman of the Central Military Commission gives the Chinese leader authority over the Party's army, the PLA, in a position roughly equivalent to Commander-in-Chief. The Chinese government is organized in such a way as to have two Central Military Commissions: a State CMC, and a Communist Party CMC. However, in practice, the difference is negligible due to the fact that the composition of the state and Party Central Military Commissions are identical.²² The distinction is rarely recognized in Chinese governmental news and information.

The Chairman of the Party CMC is officially decided by the National Party Congress Central Committee, and his or her duties involve the Party aspects of the military. Ultimately, the Central Military Commission is responsible for Party work and political work in the armed forces and defines the organizational system and organs of the Party within the PLA. In turn, the Party elements in the PLA are answerable to the CCP Central Committee and are responsible for implementing their instructions.²³ Following China's mirrored Party-State government structure, the state CMC is officially selected by the NPC, and its responsibilities are simply described as "The Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China directs the armed forces of the country."²⁴ Thus, the dual CMC Chairmanships give Xi power over both the Party elements within the military, as well as the organizational structure and leadership of the military itself.

Armed with the positions of CMC Chairman, Xi was able to launch the massive reform of the PLA in 2016. This reform saw the creation of the Strategic Support Force [战略支援部队] (SSF) and the Joint Logistics Support Force [联勤保障部队] (JLSF), the dissolution of the General Departments, and the replacement of the seven Military Regions with five Theater Commands [战区], as well as a refocused emphasis on personnel and hardware modernization. In keeping with Xi's personal interest in the military during his rise through the ranks in the 1990s, China under Xi's CMC Chairmanship has seen focused military modernization and increased importance of the military in public discourse.

President of the People's Republic of China:^v

As described above, Xi's position as President of the PRC is less consequential than his position at the apex of the Party.^{vi} The PRC President is voted on by the NPC, and, in turn, the President “promulgates laws, appoints or removes the premier, vice premiers, state councilors, ministers of ministries, ministers of commissions, the auditor general and the secretary general of the State Council, confers national medals and titles of honor, issues orders of special pardon, declares a state of emergency, declares a state of war, and issues mobilization orders.”²⁵ While this position grants Xi Jinping a great deal of formal power over the bureaucracy of the State Council, the President does not handle its operations (this is overseen by the Premier, who is traditionally the second-in-command on the Politburo Standing Committee), nor, despite the President having the ability to declare war, does it confer military leadership. While the President does not write nor introduce laws (a power reserved for the NPC's Standing Committee), the President does have the ability to set the legislative agenda. The President also has power over the numerous commissions under the NPC. However, it is worth noting that the truly powerful commissions tend to fall under the Party organization and Xi's position as General Secretary of the CCP. Thus, the title of President can be thought of as more of an ancillary to Xi's more powerful positions. Keeping both the Presidency and the General Secretaryship ensures no formal challenges to Xi's power could arise and puts him at the head of both the Party and State tracks of government. Yet, because the Chinese state government ultimately bows to the Party authority, if the Presidency and General Secretaryship were to be divided between two separate people, the General Secretary would most likely wield the larger degree of power.

CCP Politburo Standing Committee Member:

At the pinnacle of the CCP organization lies the CCP Politburo Standing Committee. Xi joined the CCP Central Committee in 2002 and has been on its Standing Committee since 2007. Xi Jinping is one of seven current CCP Politburo Standing Committee members, and, as the General Secretary of the CCP, is the de-facto leader of the body. This position at the head of the Central Committee allows Xi to set the agenda, dictate policy priorities of the Party, and keep up routine meetings with other heads of various departments who also sit on the CCP Politburo Standing Committee. Other positions of the seven current members include: Premier of the PRC (Li Keqiang [李 克强]), Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (Li Zhanshu [李战书]), Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference [人民政协] (Wang Yang [汪洋]), the head of the CCP Central Secretariat (Wang Huning [王沪宁]), the head of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (Zhao Leji [赵乐际]), and the Vice-Premier of the PRC (Han Zheng [韩正]).²⁶ Xi's proximity to these important leaders afforded by his membership on the CCP Politburo Standing Committee allows him to both coordinate with them to set Party direction and help his interest promulgate through the ranks of both Party and state governments.

Role in Leading Small Groups:

Xi Jinping has held the aforementioned titles in common with his predecessor Hu Jintao. Yet, Hu is not often considered to have had nearly the same amount of control or authority over the Party and country as Xi. One key difference (among many) between them is their use of Leading Small Groups (LSG).

v Please note that “President” is the PRC's preferred English translation of Guojia Zhuxi [国家主席], which directly translates to National Chairman. This stands in contrast to Zongtong [总统], which is the title given to the president of a republic.

vi For example, Jiang Zemin did not receive the title of President until four years after he became the General Secretary of the CCP.

Leading Small Groups will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this report, however, at a glance, LSGs are ad hoc gatherings of different government officials to set policy and issue guidelines for how their decisions can be implemented by local-level officials and various party secretaries throughout the ranks. While LSGs have existed since the founding of the PRC, Xi has established more LSGs and used them to a far larger extent than other leaders.²⁷ Xi Jinping holds at least the following positions on numerous LSGs throughout the Chinese government:

Table 2: Xi Jinping's LSG and Commission Leadership

Title	Year Joined	Leading Small Group
Director	2013	Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform (upgraded in March 2018)
Chairman	2013	Central National Security Commission [previously Central LSG for National Security]
Group Leader	2014	Leading Group for National Defense and Military Reform of the Central Military Commission ²⁸
Director	2017	Central LSG for Taiwan Affairs
Director	2017	Central Foreign Affairs Commission
Director	2017	Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development
Director	2017	Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission (upgraded in March 2018)
Director	2017	Central LSG for Internet Security and Informationization
Director	2018	Central Commission for the Rule of Law

Informal Titles:

Core Leader [领导核心]

Starting in 2016, Xi began to be referred to as the “core leader,” a title without additional powers but of symbolic significance.²⁹ Notably, Hu Jintao did not use the appellation and the CCP during his administration focused more on the appearance of collective leadership rather than a central personality. This title was used frequently during the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CCP Central Committee, appearing to center the Party’s future direction on Xi’s leadership.³⁰ Thus, given its disappearance during times of stronger collective leadership, and its reemergence during the leadership of Xi Jinping, this title denotes not only his leadership over the Party but also an appearance of personal, concentrated power.

Leader [领袖]

At the beginning of his second term as General Secretary of the CCP in 2017 Xi began to be referred to as simply Leader.¹ While the English term does not convey any special significance and the title does not confer additional power, this informal title is, nonetheless, important. Before Xi, the title of Leader was only given to Mao Zedong and his hand-picked successor Hua Guofeng, and seems to have been intentionally retired following the Cultural Revolution as the CCP attempted to shift to a style of collective authority. Xi’s adoption of the title is another signal that he may pursue singular authority and exercise power more directly and personally instead of collectively.

People’s Leader [人民领袖]

In 2018 an additional title, People’s Leader, was added, a title previously only given to Mao Zedong.³² This quiet comparison with Chairman Mao seems timed to coincide with the convening of the NPC in March 2018 and the announcement of the abolition of Presidential term limits. The title has since entered much more widespread usage, with CCTV’s website devoting a page to Xi Jinping as the People’s Leader, and portraying him as a “man

of the people.³³ This title, along with “Helmsman,” was used frequently following the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CCP Central Committee, as Xi Jinping prepared for the 20th Party Congress scheduled to begin in 2022.³⁴

Great Helmsman [伟大掌舵者]

Another direct parallel drawn between Xi Jinping and Mao is the use of the title Great Helmsman.^{vii} While earlier variations appeared as early as 2016, as with People’s Leader, Great Helmsman’s use appears to have come to prominence around the time of the constitutional amendment abolishing presidential term limits.³⁵ One article produced during the 2018 NPC proclaimed: “Everyone agreed that General Secretary Xi Jinping is the pioneer of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era and the leader in realizing the ‘Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.’ Worthy of being supported by the whole party, the leader loved by the people, worthy of being the helmsman of the country, the leader of the people.”³⁶ A few months later another article from *People’s Daily* opened by saying that “Great works require a Great Helmsman” before praising Xi for his revitalization of China.³⁷

vii It is worth noting that while the term and its meaning are the same, different characters were used for Mao and Xi’s description as Helmsman [伟大(的)舵手] and [伟大掌舵者] respectively.

Exercising Power Through Reform and Reorganization

As the head of the CCP, Xi Jinping has the power to appoint individuals, create, reshape, and disband departments, and prioritize political agendas and initiatives. In this section, we look at Xi Jinping's more prominent political campaigns waged primarily through the CCP Central Committee and the Central Military Commission. This section discusses Xi's anti-corruption campaign, structural PLA reforms, the 2018 PRC constitutional reform, Xi's placement of loyal personnel in China's security organs, and his control of China's propaganda work.

Anti-Corruption Campaign

Xi's seminal work has been his anti-corruption drive. First mentioned in his inaugural speech as General Secretary, this movement was possible due to Xi's position at the top of the Party organizational structure. Shortly after taking power in November of 2012, Xi continued the purge of Bo Xilai [薄熙来] that had started earlier in the year. Following this, a guideline was issued a month later in December of 2012 by the CCP Politburo meant to combat the appearance of corruption and graft by reducing opulence in governmental ceremonies.³⁸ Importantly, this guideline came with the enforcement mechanism of yearly reporting to the Central Committee General Office and stipulated that the on-the-ground efforts to enforce the guideline be carried out by the various levels of Party discipline inspection and supervision agencies.

It is in this detail that Xi's power, granted by the position of General Secretary, comes into focus. The anti-corruption drive was implemented as an internal Party affair. It was not organized through the Legislature (which Xi would not be the president of for another 3 months), nor was it organized through the courts or China's state ministries. Instead, the enforcement mechanism was given to the Party discipline inspection and supervision agencies, at the top of which sits the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. As a Party central commission, it, in turn, is ultimately under the leadership of the CCP General Secretary, Xi Jinping. At the time, this Commission was newly headed by Wang Qishan [王岐山]: a staunch Xi ally, who, since then, has been promoted to Vice-President and according to the PRC Constitution is set to succeed Xi if he is no longer president. In his opening speech as head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), Wang laid out the importance of building concrete anti-corruption mechanisms in the spirit of Xi's inaugural speech as the head of the Party.³⁹ In the following year, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection released a report detailing that it had dealt with 30,420 individuals and given official sanctions out to 7,692 based on Xi's initial December 2012 guideline.⁴⁰

However, Xi's authority is not omnipresent. Although his position grants him considerable power over the CCP Central Committee, for his anti-corruption campaign to be effective it needs enforcement in the provinces. This proved to be a significant roadblock as the local Party discipline inspection committees often face pressure from local power networks such as the provincial Party Committees where they are based. Often, to advance in CCP politics, finding a local Party boss to cultivate ties and sponsor one's rise is essential. This issue was hinted at by the Central Committee in November 2013, which mentioned the need to strengthen supervision of leading cadres, and recommended the use of the CCDI to improve supervision and inspection capabilities of provinces and municipalities.⁴¹ Thus, to overcome this roadblock, in March 2014, the authority of the CCDI was greatly enhanced by giving it the power to directly nominate the provincial discipline inspection committee secretaries and deputy secretaries.⁴² Essentially, this means Beijing is responsible for staffing the various discipline inspection committees, which, in turn, places much more power in the hands of the head of the CCDI. Xi Jinping has kept this position in trusted hands with the placement of Zhao Leji, reportedly one of Xi's allies, as head in 2017.⁴³

Furthermore, in part to consolidate loyalists in important positions, a cross-over agency was announced in March of 2018 during the 13th NPC conference: the National Supervision Commission [国家监察委员会].⁴⁴ This agency is nominally under the control of the NPC (China's State Legislature), was commissioned as an anti-graft body, and was enhanced in 2019 to write laws and regulations to be legislated by the NPC Standing Committee (headed by Li Zhanshu, a close Xi Jinping ally).⁴⁵ Importantly, this Commission is tied directly to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (as of January 2021 they share a website⁴⁶). Further, it subsumed the former Ministry of Supervision [监察部] and the National Bureau of Corruption Prevention [国家预防腐败局], and is led by Yang Xiaodu [杨晓渡], a veteran of the National Bureau of Corruption Prevention and concurrent Deputy Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection: Xi's favored method for punishing Party members.⁴⁷ Tellingly, the National Supervision Commission started as a pilot program that ran simultaneously out of Shanxi, Beijing, and the location of Xi's rise: Zhejiang.⁴⁸

There is much more to Xi's anti-corruption campaign than mentioned above, however, it would not have been possible without Xi's reliance on the authority granted to him by the title of CCP General Secretary. This authority allowed him to appoint a dependable head of the CCDI, push through staffing reforms, and create new agencies to aid his policy goals.

Reforming the PLA

Likewise, the Chairmanship of the CMC affords Xi Jinping a large degree of latitude to implement reforms and structural changes over the People's Liberation Army. One of his lasting impacts has been the deep and numerous reforms in the PLA. While these reforms culminated in 2016, they have their roots in much older, fundamental issues. Xi appears to have followed a similar track with changes to the PLA as he did with reforms of the CCP: instigate anti-corruption probes, make structural changes to improve said anti-corruption efforts, and then follow through with controversial reforms once a consensus has been crafted with the remaining officials.

Corruption within the PLA had been a long-running issue by the time Xi became General Secretary. Issues persisted in terms of not only procurement and state-owned weapons manufacturers, but also in the form of patron-client relationships among the officer class. Xi took steps to address it soon after his appointment to CMC Chairman. In October of 2014, Xi took the initiative and transferred the PLA Audit Office [审计署] from the General Logistics Department [总后勤部] directly to the Central Military Commission, over which, as Chairman, he has direct authority.⁴⁹ Reportedly, this had the effect of over 4,000 cadres at or above the regiment leader level being audited, with firings and penalties swiftly following between the implementation and the start of 2015.⁵⁰ Further, the PLA's Discipline Inspection Commission was also transferred to the CMC from the General Political Department, which, much like the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, gave Xi Jinping a powerful avenue to prosecute corruption and ensure commitment to the Party line.⁵¹

Since their implementation, these reforms have borne fruit. Former CMC Vice-Chairmen Guo Boxiong [郭伯雄] and Xu Caihou [徐才厚], as well as CMC Political Work Director Zhang Yang [张阳], CMC Joint Staff Director Fang Fenghui [房峰辉], and at least 70 other officers accused of giving bribes have been investigated, among many others.⁵² Xi has further shown his willingness to investigate high-level officers by implementing hotlines and other methods for informing the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission of ethics violations and disciplinary issues.⁵³ Corollary to these developments, Xi has also been moving trusted partners up the ranks and into positions of importance. Reportedly, General Qin Shengxiang [秦生祥] rose in importance during Xi's first term to both head the CMC General Office from 2012-2017, as well as direct the CMC Reform and Organization

Office [改革和编制办公室] from August 2016 onward.⁵⁴ Likewise, Major General Zhong Shaojun [钟绍军], an ally to Xi since his position as Zhejiang Party Secretary, rose rapidly to be the CMC General Office Deputy Director in 2013 and then full director in 2017.⁵⁵ Reportedly, this promotion to Director of the CMC General Office was accompanied by a promotion from senior colonel to major general.⁵⁶

These steps in reforming the internal discipline mechanisms preceded Xi's biggest shake-up of the PLA in 2016. Previously, the PLA was broken into separate areas of responsibility called Military Regions. However, as part of CMC Chairman Xi's reform plans, these Military Regions were instead transformed into five Theater Commands: North, South, East, West, and Central. This represents not only a step forward for inter-service coordination but also stripped the PLA Ground Forces of some of their predominance in the Chinese military by putting them on the same level as the other services and creating an independent joint staff structure. However, with Xi's focus on a more balanced, joint fighting force he has leveraged his leadership over China's military to promote an Admiral, Yuan Yubai [袁誉柏], as head of the Southern Theater Command, and an Air Force General, Yi Xiaoguang [乙晓光], as head of the Central Theater Command.⁵⁷ These moves, coupled with his closeness with Xu Qiliang [许其亮] (another Air Force General and the first from another service to be appointed Vice-Chairman of the CMC) have allowed Xi to demonstrate his commitment to modernizing the PLA with focus on warfighting capabilities, as well as ensure that the reforms will be carried out by dependable senior staff.

However, Xi also has other roles outside of the CMC that influence the military. In his position as General Secretary of the CCP, Xi wields tremendous power to set the agenda and present his ideas for governance. Often, ideas that begin as directives in one organization can be brought over into other organizations Xi also controls. Thus, to fully understand how Xi's titles and authority interact, it is necessary to follow how initiatives from one position flow into another. Besides anti-corruption, one of Xi's more enduring drives has been his focus on improving the strategic capabilities of the PLA by developing technologies with inherent dual-use capabilities through Military-Civil Fusion [军民融合] (MCF). This concept has been a major focus of Xi's work through his position as General Secretary and has inherently influenced his aims while using his authority as the CMC Chairman to reform the PLA. Foremost among his structural reforms, Xi disbanded the four General Departments of the PLA and completely reworked the system. Through a network of new organs, the former duties of the General Departments now fall under the CMC directly. This has allowed Xi to prioritize his various reform drives (including MCF) since the new organs sit directly under his authority.

For example, the General Armaments Department [总装备部] (GAD) was responsible for weapons procurement and the creation of new platforms and hardware for China's military. Many reforms were tried through the years, with a focus on breaking up its reliance on and questionable relationship with China's defense-focused state-owned enterprises. However, despite previous reform attempts, by 2009, only 20 percent of the GAD's acquisitions were done through competitive bidding.⁵⁸ As part of the 2016 round of reforms that created the PLA's Theater Commands, the GAD was broken up and its procurement responsibilities were handed to the new Equipment Development Department [装备发展部] (EDD). In this respect, the EDD works extensively with the State Council and its State Administration for Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense [国家国防科技工业局] (SASTIND) (an organization responsible for coordinating the different groups related to MCF, among other things), state-owned enterprises that produce equipment and platforms for the People's Liberation Army, and with private corporations whose products have dual-use applications.⁵⁹ The EDD has taken numerous steps to incorporate MCF in its activities, including setting the general criteria for obtainment, application, and protection of military intellectual property rights; clarifying research, development, and bidding for contracts, as well as declassifying more than 2,300 dual-use technology patents since 2017 to encourage civilian enterprise

development in the security realm.⁶⁰

In conclusion, Xi Jinping's position as Chairman of the Central Military Commission and head of the PLA affords him both considerable power over military organization and strategic vision. As demonstrated by Xi's 2016 reforms of the PLA, he was able to not only prosecute venal and potentially reticent PLA officials, but also push through massive and sweeping reforms of China's military structure, procurement system, and military-civil relations.

2018 Constitutional Reform

A few months after the beginning of Xi's second term, he was able to pass one of his most revolutionary accomplishments. On 11 March 2018, the 13th NPC announced an amendment to the Chinese national Constitution to abolish term limits for the position of President. This move was a striking reversal of the Chinese leadership's direction since the time of Mao, which appeared to limit personal ambition and promote a more collective type of leadership. To understand how Xi may have accomplished this reform, it is important to understand where Xi's authority lies.

Chinese governmental decisions are much like a proverbial iceberg. By the time the policies and announcements surface to the top of the public news sphere, there has been a vast unseen structure of backroom dealings, hidden talks, and appointments. Xi's reform was taken up on 11 March 2018, a few months after the CCP National Party Conference, which changed the CCP Politburo Standing Committee members and gave Xi a second term as General Secretary. Li Zhanshu [栗战书] (a close Xi ally) was given the position of Chairman of the 13th NPC Standing Committee on 17 March 2018. With both the constitutional reform abolishing term limits and the appointment of a Xi supporter to the head of the NPC, March 2018 was a potential high point in the expansion of Xi's power. While the specifics of how the change was negotiated are not public, the CCP's main conference occurs four months before the NPC, often setting the tone and direction for the latter meeting.

At the 19th CCP Party Conference in October of 2017, many important movements occurred. Among them, Zhang Dejiang [张德江] was given the position of Director of the LSG for Hong Kong and Macao [中央港澳工作领导小组] (a position Xi Jinping himself was in from 2007-2012), in supplement to his position as Deputy Director of the Central National Security Commission [中央国家安全委员会]: a favored project of Xi's.⁶¹ Further, Wang Chen [王晨] was placed on the 25-man Politburo from his previous position on the 205-member Central Committee and retained his seat on the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform [中央全面深化改革领导小组] – one of Xi's most important policymaking tools, as well as his positions on the NPC.⁶² Both of these men held strong positions in the NPC, with Zhang as the Chairman of the NPC Standing Committee, and Wang was the Vice-Chairman and Secretary-General. Both now work in organizations led personally by Xi Jinping (the National Security Commission, and the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform respectively).

As the NPC functions, the NPC Standing Committee writes bills, while the Presidium [会议主席团] (a group of nearly 200 legislators, almost always with dual, high-level roles in the CCP) decides which bills to place on the agenda to bring to vote. While this nominally appears to be a form of checks and balances, in practice, the Chairman of the NPC Standing Committee – which writes the bills – also heads the Presidium. Both Li Zhanshu, the current head of the NPC Standing Committee, and Zhang Dejiang before him wore these hats concurrently.⁶³ At the time of the Constitutional amendment, Wang Chen explained that the change was a “major decision made by the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core in adhering to and developing socialism with

Chinese characteristics in the new era. It is to promote the comprehensive rule of law and promote the country.”⁶⁴ He continued to promote the Party line, stating “Our country’s constitution must continue to improve and develop along with the development of the Party’s practice of leading the people in building socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Wang continued to emphasize that the proposal to amend the constitution had come from the CCP Central Committee, and that it is the NPC’s duty to uphold Party leadership. In no uncertain terms, these statements argue that the country must follow with the will of the CCP, with Xi as its head, and that Xi’s directions are for the good of the nation. It was, nonetheless, a major shift in Party policy, which previously sought to limit too much concentrated political power by creating these limitations.

At the major CCP conference before the NPC meeting, both NPC Chairman Zhang Dejiang and his Vice-Chairman Wang Chen were moved to positions on important Commissions that Xi championed. While the specifics of their promotions and the exact details of the constitutional amendment are not known, both of these men’s career moves brought them to Commissions closer to Xi Jinping. Likewise, it is currently unknown if Xi will remain as PRC President past his second term, however the ability to do so expands his potential power immensely by securing him a tool to remain in a position of power and signaling his ability to push through major reforms to Chinese governance.

Internal Security Personnel

Tying in with the anti-corruption campaign, one of Xi’s earliest moves was in dismantling Zhou Yongkang’s [周永康] political network in China’s security apparatus. Zhou Yongkang’s background began in China’s State-owned oil companies before joining the CCP Politburo in 2002 and becoming the Minister of Public Security [公安部]. In 2007 he joined the CCP Politburo Standing Committee and took on the powerful role of Secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission [政法委员会]. However, shortly after Xi assumed the title of General Secretary, many of Zhou Yongkang’s associates in the oil industry and China’s security apparatus came under investigation and, eventually, arrest.⁶⁵ Li Dongsheng [李东生], for instance, was the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Public Security, Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee, and Office Director of the Central Leading Group for Prevention and Handling of Cult Issues [中央防范和处理邪教问题领导小组办公室] before being dismissed from his positions in December of 2013, and jailed in 2016 for bribery.⁶⁶ Similarly, Ma Jian [马建] was the vice minister of the Ministry of State Security [国家安全部] beginning in 2006 before being put under investigation in 2015, removed from office in 2016, and jailed in 2018 for bribery and insider trading.⁶⁷ In 2014, Zhou Yongkang himself would fall under investigation and eventually be arrested and sentenced to life in prison in 2015.

Xi Jinping appears to have closely monitored Zhou’s investigation, with Fu Zhenghua [傅政华], a Vice Minister of Public Security reporting directly to Xi.⁶⁸ Fu was appointed to this position in 2013. Before this, Fu was an investigator with the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau, and served as Deputy Director of the Criminal Investigation Bureau of the Ministry of Public Security and Deputy Director of the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau, before being appointed as the director of the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau.⁶⁹ During this time, Fu took particular interest in controlling online spaces as a matter of national security and stability and became famous for several high-level cases, including shutting down a major brothel in Beijing.⁷⁰ After heading the investigation, Fu was promoted to Minister of Justice in 2018, before retiring in 2020.

This meteoric rise from Beijing municipal investigator to Minister of Justice in under ten years was also mirrored in Zhao Kezhi [赵克志], current Minister of Public Security. In 2017 Zhao was appointed as both Minister of Public Security and secretary of the Ministry’s Party Committee.⁷¹ However, Zhao had no background connected

to law enforcement or China's security apparatus. Instead, Zhao worked his way up Party Committees in Jiangsu, Guizhou, and Hebei from 2006 until 2017 when he was brought in to head the Ministry of Public Security. It is unknown what direct connection Zhao may have with Xi, however, as Minister of Public Security, he may be connected to the activities in Xinjiang which have intensified under Xi's tenure. Shortly after being appointed State Councilor in March of 2018, Zhao gave a series of speeches focusing on the public security frontier defense forces and "violent terrorist activities, ethnic separatist activities, and religious extremist activities."⁷² More recently, Zhao gave a speech on 24 March 2021 emphasizing the "long-term construction of Xinjiang, tightening the anti-terrorism struggle, and firmly grasping the implementation of various anti-terrorism and stability maintenance measures."⁷³

Other people connected to Xi's turnover of China's security forces, such as Liu Jinguo [刘金国] and Deng Weiping [邓卫平], have had slightly more complicated career trajectories. However, considering that the related departments acted as a political network for Zhou Yongkang, it may be inferred that the struggle for full control is ongoing. For instance, in May 2017, Xi made a public address calling for both loyalty from the public security forces to the CCP, and vice-versa.⁷⁴ Likewise, as of August 2020, there appear to be more purges and investigations occurring related to security and law enforcement.⁷⁵ Thus, in conjunction with Xi's campaign to combat corruption, the work in securing loyalty from the Chinese security apparatus appears to be an ongoing battle.^{viii} However, Xi's earliest moves in this field point to the authority granted to him as head of the CCP, the PRC, and PLA. General Secretary Xi was able to find people from outside the typical avenues to prosecute Zhou's faction of the Party and to fill the roles left vacant following their detention. Due to his powers as General Secretary, he has able to fast-track loyalists and sideline officials of opposing interests.

Propaganda Personnel

A continuing political campaign of Xi's has been his focus on the CCP Central Propaganda Department. As can be reflected through Xi's many ideological campaigns over the years, propaganda has been a long-standing feature of his tenure as General Secretary. Shortly after taking office, Xi's China embraced the "Chinese Dream," the Party embraced "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," and the government embraced the "Four Comprehensives" in 2012, 2013, and 2014 respectively, with Xi Jinping Thought even being added to the PRC Constitution in 2018.⁷⁶ However, many of these ideological drives may be considered as a final manifestation of a deeper push for control over the propaganda system within the PRC. They may indicate a strengthening of a position that has already occurred, rather than what direction the leadership intends to pursue. As with other organs, Xi's authority here stems from a combination of placing loyalists in important positions, signaling what will be important during his tenure as General Secretary, and directing funds and attention to his projects and interests.

viii Fu Zhenghua himself appears to have fallen under investigation by the CCDI on 2 October 2021 for "serious disciplinary violations." For more information visit https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/toutiao/202110/t20211002_251687.html

The CCP Central Propaganda Department boasts a number of top-level officials with ties to Xi's powerbase in Zhejiang or a history of supporting Xi Jinping's ideological campaigns. Huang Kunming [黄坤明], the current head of the CCP Central Propaganda Department (sometimes translated as Publicity Department), has a background that closely resembles Xi Jinping's.⁷⁷ Both men worked their way up the Party apparatus in Fujian through the 1980's and 1990's before moving to Zhejiang in the 2000's. Huang Kunming was appointed Propaganda Minister in Zhejiang in 2007, just as Xi joined the CCP Politburo Standing Committee and became Hu Jintao's likely successor. Huang remained in Zhejiang while Xi went to Beijing. However, after Xi assumed the title of General Secretary, Huang quickly received a rapid series of promotions: first in 2013 to Deputy Minister of the CCP Central Propaganda Department, then in 2014 he also gained the position of Director of the Office of the Central Civilization Construction Steering Committee [中央精神文明建设指导委员会], and finally, in 2017 he joined the Politburo, the Central Secretariat, and assumed the position of Director of the CCP Central Propaganda Department. In the span of four years, Huang Kunming ascended from a member of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Standing Committee to the head of the Party's propaganda organization. The man Huang replaced, Liu Qibao [刘奇葆], had been in the directorship for five years, before being replaced and finding a position as Vice Chairman of the 13th CPPCC National Committee.⁷⁸

Following a similar trajectory, Shen Haixiong [慎海雄], a current Vice Minister of the CCP Central Propaganda Department and Director of China Central Radio and Television [中国中央电视台] (CCTV), also worked through the Zhejiang Party organization in the early 2000's before moving to Shanghai in 2004, three years ahead of Xi's similar move to Shanghai.⁷⁹

As Xi Jinping became General Secretary 2012, Shen would make Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the Xinhua News Agency as well as a member of the Party Leadership Group for the agency, before becoming Deputy President of Xinhua in 2014, and Deputy Director of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television [国家广播电视总局] as well as Director of CCTV in 2018. According to Shen, while working in Zhejiang in the early 2000's he made a name for himself using the Provincial Party Committee's internal reporting to expose and bring attention to grievous corruption. According to Shen, this drew the attention of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee leadership (including a rising Xi Jinping), who then began encouraging people to talk to him about issues they wanted to be promoted.⁸⁰

Xi's personnel appointments in the Central Propaganda Department also appear to emphasize ideological legitimacy. Both of the other Vice Ministers of the Central Propaganda Department, Sun Yeli [孙业礼] and Wang Xiaohui [王晓辉], are connected to Party history research. Sun Yeli was the Deputy Dean of the Central Party History and Documentation Research Institute [中央党史和文献研究院], and Wang Xiaohui served as the Deputy Director of the Central Policy Research Office [中央政策研究室].⁸¹ Reportedly, Sun Yeli's main work consists of researching and editing ideological research for Party and state leaders, as well as building the ideological foundations for Xi's Comprehensively Deepening Reform drive, as well as the rationale for the Belt and Road Initiative.⁸² Similarly, Wang Xiaohui is currently focused on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP and distilling Party history for the general public.⁸³ This effort appears to have come to a head at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CCP Central Committee on 11 November 2021, where the Party passed a resolution detailing its hundred year history and direction for the future.⁸⁴ During the Plenary Session, Xi Jinping was referred to as the Party's core numerous times, stating "The Party established Comrade Xi Jinping as the core of the CCP Central Committee and the core position of the entire Party." The centrality of Xi Jinping to the Party is echoed later in the communique, summarized as: "the CCP Central Committee called on the entire party, the entire army and the people of all ethnic groups to unite more closely around the CCP Central Committee with Comrade Xi

Jinping as the core.” This strong messaging has been interpreted by many as a sign that the Party is preparing for Xi Jinping to continue as China’s leader for the near future.⁸⁵

Propaganda and the control of information has been a powerful tool for Xi Jinping as General Secretary. According to data collected by Damien Ma and Neil Thomas, by 2015 the budget of the Central Propaganda Department increased 433% from the previous year, with Xinhua’s spending increasing 18% from 2013 to 2017, and “cultural undertakings” increasing 17% from Hu Jintao’s leadership to Xi Jinping’s.⁸⁶ Often, Xinhua and the Central Propaganda Department are used to promote Xi’s upcoming drives. For example, in March of 2018, CCP Central Propaganda Department Director Huang Kunming delivered a speech on adding Xi Jinping Thought to the PRC constitution, saying: “This constitutional amendment has established Xi Jinping’s thinking on socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era as the country’s guiding ideology, and further consolidated the common ideological foundation for the unity and struggle of the entire party and the people of the country.”⁸⁷ A little over a week later, Huang promoted the Party’s overall leadership, emphasizing that it is a core task of the Party and state to strengthen the Party’s leadership role.⁸⁸ These twin efforts focusing on Xi Jinping Thought and strengthening the Party’s leadership came just as China’s NPC formally abolished term limits for Xi’s title of President. In a similar vein, in December of 2020 China Central Radio and Television launched a large-scale recruitment effort overseen by Shen Haixiong to search for college graduates to join the Party’s propaganda arm to promote the image of State-Owned Enterprises.⁸⁹ This may point to a renewed focus on SOEs in the coming years.

Thus, regarding the Party’s Central Propaganda Department Xi was able to wield power by appointing men he knew and trusted, as well as others that had backgrounds on personal and Party legitimacy. This allows him to both emphasize his policy decisions through either ideological justification, public propaganda, or personally visiting media outlets on tour, as well as sidelining and derailing the careers of those not supportive of his agenda.⁹⁰

Exercising Power through Leading Small Groups

The reform and reorganization efforts profiled in the previous section may be understood as the larger strategic-level efforts which Xi Jinping appears to be pursuing. His creation of a series of Leading Small Groups, and direct involvement in many of them, may be one of the ways he is exercising close personal control over these efforts. While Leading Small Groups have been a feature of CCP organization since at least the 1950's, Xi has made noteworthy use of them to advance his priorities, promote trusted officials, and, through the use of collective study sessions, inform the upper echelons of the Party on ways to move China forward in his preferred directions. With broad membership, LSGs can be thought of as a tool to coordinate between department heads, and as a publishing house to pass policy positions on to the provincial and local Party Committees.

The Evolutionary role of LSGs from Mao to Hu

Various Leading Small Groups have been set up or abolished throughout PRC history. According to Alice Miller, Leading Small Groups within the CCP Central Committee were first formalized in 1958 as part of the effort to reduce the personal authority of Mao and institute a more collective style of Party leadership.⁹¹ However, as the chaos of the Cultural Revolution spread, the Central Committee's LSGs took a backseat to Mao and his personal clique. Since LSGs were first properly instituted as a method of collective leadership and functioned as a sort of council, they were both an obvious target for Mao's consolidation of power and were quickly reinstated as Deng took the reins of the Party in the late 1970s.

This trend towards collective, de-personalized rule appears to have continued through the tenures of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao in the '90s and '00s. Leading Small Groups were once again staffed by CCP Central Committee members, with Xi himself joining three LSG's after being appointed to the CCP Politburo Standing Committee in 2007.⁹² These appointments were by no means his first time joining a small commission; however, this was his first opportunity to participate in these groups at the highest echelons of Party organization.

Starting in 2007, Xi was made the Director for the Hong Kong and Macao Working Coordinating Group [中央港澳工作领导小组] at the tenth anniversary of the British return of Hong Kong to China. Xi's predecessor, Chen Zuoer [陈佐洱] emphasized the importance of Hong Kong and Macao to the CCP, saying "maintaining the long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong and Macau is a major issue for the Chinese Communist Party," while welcoming Xi Jinping as the new head of the group.⁹³ Also in 2007, Xi was placed as Vice-Director for the Foreign Affairs LSG [中央外事工作领导小组], grooming him again as a real contender for Party leadership.

However, Xi's most prominent LSG appointment during this time was on the Central LSG for Party Building [中央党的建设工作领导小组]. This LSG is significantly less concrete than other groups, which are often established with clear goals or jurisdictions. In 1999 Hu Jintao, soon to be General Secretary of the CCP, gave a talk to the Central LSG for Party Building. The text of the speech is not significantly different than speeches given during Xi Jinping's time as head of the nation. Hu mentioned the Party taking responsibility, carrying out CCP educational reforms, and performing self-criticisms to improve the spirit of the Party.⁹⁴ However, importantly the meeting featured over 400 representatives from different agencies both central and provincial in a manner that highlights the importance of the Party in general, and this LSG in particular.

Xi Jinping joined the LSG for Party Building in 2007 as the Director of the organization. In his speech following the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, Xi laid out the importance of the Party in “maintaining public order, serving the people, and ensuring social stability [...] Party committees at all levels must vigorously publicize the advanced party organizations and outstanding cadres that have emerged in this earthquake relief struggle.”⁹⁵ This event, and Xi’s emphasis on using the Party to deal with any and all issues, would foreshadow his role as General Secretary and his emphasis on Party involvement in China’s public life. Further in the text, he tellingly homed in on the critical role that the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection would play in supervision of the earthquake relief efforts, the CCDI being an LSG which he would later emphasize in his pivotal anti-corruption campaign.⁹⁶ After Xi became General Secretary in 2012, the leadership of the LSG for Party Building passed to Liu Yunshan [刘云山], while Zhao Leji and Wang Qishan were appointed Deputy Directors of the LSG.⁹⁷ Wang would serve in this capacity while concurrently working as the head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and would then pass the reins of the Commission to Zhao Leji in 2017. Today, similar to 1999, meetings of the Party Building LSG feature representatives from across the CCP’s sprawling bureaucracy. These two appointments for Wang would allow him to wield the stick of anti-corruption while also contributing to the coordination and agenda-setting of the Party Building LSG.

Xi’s Leadership On LSGs:

Xi would continue his focus on Central Committee Leading Small Groups during his tenure as General Secretary: creating many new groups, leading those connected to his larger goals, and sidelining those he made redundant. Table 2, replicated here, shows Xi’s leadership roles in various LSGs and commissions.

Table 2: Xi Jinping’s LSG and Commission Leadership

Title	Year Joined	Commission/LSG Name
Director	2013	Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform [upgraded in March 2018]
Chairman	2013	Central National Security Commission [previously Central LSG for National Security]
Group Leader	2014	Leading Group for National Defense and Military Reform of the Central Military Commission ⁹⁸
Director	2017	Central LSG for Taiwan Affairs
Director	2017	Central Foreign Affairs Commission
Director	2017	Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development
Director	2017	Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission [upgraded in March 2018]
Director	2017	Central LSG for Internet Security and Informationization
Director	2018	Central Commission for the Rule of Law

Currently, Xi is the head of at least nine different LSGs and Commissions.⁹⁹ Some of these, like his position on the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, are promotions from his time as Vice-President of the PRC. Others, he joined as director to steer policy in these realms. This would include the LSG for Taiwan Affairs [中央对台工作领导小组] and the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission [中央财经委员会]. The third category consists of Leading Small Groups which he personally created. The next section will go into greater detail on these various groups and what their establishment may mean for Xi’s authority and agenda.

Comprehensively Deepening Reform LSG (2013)

One of Xi’s first moves as General Secretary was to create the Central Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform [中央全面深化改革领导小组] (which has since been upgraded to a commission). In

November of 2013, one year after Xi became head of the Party, the CCP Central Committee published a comprehensive reform strategy after the Third Plenary Meeting, which singularly discussed comprehensively deepening reforms and established the need for the Leading Small Group.¹⁰⁰ The document starts by invoking the history of the CCP in making reforms since the 1980s and continues to make the case for transforming not only government structures, but also Chinese society, economy, laws, and welfare, as well as setting the year 2020 as the goal for these reforms to bear fruit. These goals are broad-ranging and touch upon a myriad of diverse and disparate domains.

To better guide the implementation of these goals, the Central Committee officially established the Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, with its first meeting in January of 2014.¹⁰¹ As General Secretary of the CCP and de-facto leader of the Central Committee, Xi Jinping highlighted the significance of this LSG by appointing high-level members, with Li Keqiang (Premier of the State Council), Liu Yunshan (then Standing Committee member and future Director of the Party-Building LSG), and Zhang Gaoli [张高丽] (then Standing Committee member and Vice-Premier of the State Council) as Vice-Directors.

At the first meeting of the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, topics discussed included: China's business environment, financial system, international economics and development, free trade zones, reform of state-owned enterprises, law enforcement, science & technology (S&T) project investments, cultural attitudes towards research, and public health.¹⁰² These are all wildly varying topics that require massive participation through all sectors of China's dual Party-State apparatus. We can see this reflected in both the overwhelming size of the Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, as well as the vast number of LSGs Xi personally leads. By touching upon a wealth of diverse topics, Xi can personally, face-to-face, ensure that his pitch is being heard by the people who need to receive it.

In matching with the massive scope of the various realms the LSG touched upon, the scale and breadth of its full membership was equally grand. Reportedly, there were at least 43 members of the LSG, a larger group compared to the typically ten or so members that LSGs contain. These 43 members included over half of the Politburo, both the Vice-Chairmen of the CMC, members of the Secretariat, NPC, State Council, and members of China's Supreme Court. Featured among the inner members were then-and-future important figures of Xu Qiliang, Wang Yang, Zhao Leji, Wang Chen, Wang Huning, Li Zhanshu, and Ma Kai [马凯].¹⁰³ Importantly, at least five secretaries of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection were present, with the Commission being mentioned by name in the 2013 reform strategy as part of the solution to diffusing supervision through the provinces.¹⁰⁴ Of the six special teams designated for implementing reform, discipline inspection was a prominent one, along with party building.

Since its inception, the Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms has been a vehicle for Xi Jinping to make his voice heard at all levels of China's vast bureaucracy. The group has touched upon highly diverse state and governmental sectors, anti-corruption, and party discipline reforms, as well as military and economic reforms. With the exception of Han Zheng who was later placed on the LSG in 2018, all of the current 19th CCP Politburo Standing Committee members were present on the LSG, as well as other important figures like Liu He [刘鹤] (Director of the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission Office [中央财经委员会办公室]) and General Xu Qiliang (Vice-Chairman of the CMC).^{ix} In keeping with its large scale and

ix To highlight just how important the success of this LSG is to the current CCP, at the five-year anniversary mark in 2018, Xinhua state media started maintaining a website dedicated purely to reforms made since the Central Committee's comprehensive reform strategy was published in 2013. For reference, visit <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/>

scope, the decision was made to upgrade the Leading Small Group to a full Commission to give it the resources it needed to accomplish the task. According to a published statement: “changing the Central Leading Group for Comprehensive Deepening of Reform into a committee is an important measure to improve the party’s leadership system and mechanism for major tasks.”¹⁰⁵ It further stated that “Party committees at all levels must strengthen leadership over reform work, strengthen organizational and coordination capabilities, and ensure that the Party Central Committee’s reform decisions and plans are implemented.”

The Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform was created in March 2018, with its first meeting on 28 March. One of the first topics raised at the meeting was the importance of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the creation of the National Supervision Commission, praising both as “a practical measure to implement and deepen the reform of the national supervision system.”¹⁰⁶ This type of reinforcement is where we see the softer, yet more pervasive side of Xi Jinping’s authority. As General Secretary, Xi is the head of the Central Committee and has power over the various bureaus, groups, commissions, and offices housed within it. And, as such, this title grants him the authority to place a trusted member at the head of the CCDI to deal with internal conflict, create a supra-governmental group to oversee his reforms, echo his message of reform through the Secretariat and down the chain to local Party officials, replace ministries and commissions that he has made redundant with his reforms, and then use the very platforms he has created to tout the centrality of the organizations he wields power through. All of this is legally possible through his positions at the head of the Communist Party since he is operating through the Party alone. However, Xi also ensures that the message is heard by the necessary ministers by including large swaths of the CCP leadership on his key LSGs, and personally chairing the Commissions and LSGs that matter most to him and his lines of authority.

Central National Security Commission (2013)

Another early group established by Xi was the National Security Commission. The group had already existed in a more limited capacity since the year 2000, but under Xi’s tenure, it was upgraded to a full commission.¹⁰⁷ In 1997 General Secretary Jiang Zemin paid a visit to the United States where he learned about the U.S. National Security Council. Wanting to emulate this centralized and comprehensive organization, the CCP Central Committee established the Central National Security Leading Small Group in September of 2000. It was composed of members of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee and the CCP Politburo in charge of foreign affairs, as well as state council ministers of foreign affairs and national security agencies. Much like the U.S. National Security Council, the Central National Security LSG touched upon issues of international relations, national security, and defense. Reportedly, its first major work involved formulating China’s reaction to the 2001 Hainan Island incident, where a United States Navy aircraft and a People’s Liberation Army Navy fighter collided in mid-air.¹⁰⁸

In November of 2013, the Third Plenary meeting of the 18th CCP Central Commission (the same meeting that established Xi’s Leading Small Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reform) announced the imminent establishment of the Central National Security Commission, an upgrade of the previous Central National Security Leading Small Group. The Commission was created in the name of “safeguarding the interests of the people, maximizing harmony, improving social governance, maintaining national security, and improving the public security system.”¹⁰⁹

The first meeting was held in January of 2014 and established Xi Jinping as the Chairman of the Commission, with Li Keqiang and Zhang Dejiang as Vice-Chairmen. With its primary goal of being a decision-making, deliberating, and coordinating body for national security work, the new scope of the Commission touched upon network security, economic and defense construction, and the development of MCF, a project which Xi would later create

a dedicated LSG for.¹¹⁰ As with Xi's other important deliberative body from this time, the Leading Small Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reform, the scope of the Central National Security Commission is broad and has the potential to reach into many varied sectors of Chinese government and society. Reviewing its first five years, Xi praised the Commission as fulfilling its role as a coordinating body and emphasized that party committees on all levels should push their local governments to realize the decisions drafted at the highest levels.¹¹¹

Xi's position at the head of this concentrated, umbrella organization affords him the ability to meet face-to-face with the different heads of various departments that touch upon the broad definition of national security. The first meeting in 2014 allowed him to emphasize his MCF project as something that must be taken seriously as part of China's national security strategy. Likewise, the 2018 meeting emphasized the importance of intra-party supervision as a method of pushing through the reforms to all levels of the CCP bureaucracy. Further, in April of 2018 Zhang Dejiang was replaced by Li Zhanshu (both as Vice-Chairman of the Central National Security Commission and as Chairman of the NPC), a close ally of Xi Jinping. These various initiatives are central to Xi's stated goals and methods, and, by presenting a consistent tone and target, as well as placing trusted partners in leadership positions, Xi can use this LSG to hammer home his priorities for national security.

Central Cyberspace Affairs LSG (2014)

Related to the Central National Security Commission, the Central Cyberspace Affairs Leading Small Group [中央网络安全和信息化领导小组] held its first meeting in February of 2014. The leadership of the LSG was composed of Xi Jinping as Director, and Li Keqiang and Liu Yunshan as Deputy-Directors.¹¹² Importantly, all three men were also members of the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform LSG. Much like other Leading Small Groups, the LSG was stated to have been established to "play a centralized and unified leadership role, coordinate major cybersecurity and informatization issues in various fields, and formulate and implement national cybersecurity and informatization development strategies, macro plans and major policies."¹¹³ Xi Jinping personally emphasized the relationship that network security had with both national security and transforming the economy. Thus, this LSG ties strongly into both Xi's large-scale Comprehensively Deepening Reform LSG, and his more focused Central National Security Commission, while providing a leadership roster that crosses into the State Council. For example, in 2016 the Cyberspace Administration of China (a State Council organization) released the "National Cyberspace Security Strategy" explicitly stating that it was approved by the Central Cyberspace Affairs LSG and was published to implement Xi's strategic thinking.¹¹⁴

In March of 2018, the Central Cyberspace Affairs LSG was upgraded to a Commission at the same time as the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform LSG for the purpose of "top-level design, overall layout, overall coordination, overall promotion, and implementation of major tasks in related fields."¹¹⁵ In practical terms, this brought the already close relationship between the Central Cyberspace Affairs LSG and the State Cyberspace Administration of China even closer.^x As the published mission statement suggests, the State Cyberspace Administration of China is given an administrative role in drafting and implementing China's governing rules on cyberspace usage while the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission takes a strategic and planning position.

In his role as the head of numerous LSGs, Xi Jinping has the power to set his reform agenda at the umbrella Central Comprehensively Deepening Reform Commission, and then further refine it down to particular plans in the Central National Security Commission and the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission. Through these mechanisms, Xi can implement his strategies by convening conferences of the Central Commissions and passing

x As of January 2021, the two share a common website

their decisions to the State Council's various Ministries. For example, in April of 2018, Xi hosted a massive cybersecurity work conference, which included all of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee members, and participants from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the Ministry of Public Security, the CCP Central Committee, the PRC Supreme Court, various state-owned enterprises, military units, and, naturally, the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission.¹¹⁶

As with many LSGs, the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission stands between several different fields. It coordinates between State Council ministries, is staffed by many members of the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, and touches upon both economic considerations and China's national security. Yet, similar to the extent of the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission is not unique in the scope of its expertise nor the scale of its reach.

Central Military-Civil Fusion Development Commission (2017)

From early on in his appointment as General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping has strongly advocated for MCF as a workable strategy for both improving China's national defense capabilities and helping China develop its economy. At the Third Plenary session of the 18th CCP Central Committee from 9-12 November 2013, Xi emphasized that "It is necessary to deepen the adjustment and reform of the military system, advance the adjustment and reform of military policies and systems, and promote the in-depth development of military-civilian fusion."¹¹⁷ By 2015 Xi declared that "upgrading the development of military-civilian fusion to a national strategy is a major achievement of our long-term exploration of the law of coordinated development of economic construction and national defense construction."¹¹⁸ And, by March of 2016, the Politburo had officially recognized MCF as a national strategy with their drafting of the "Opinions on the Integrated Development of Economic Construction and National Defense Construction" document.¹¹⁹ A few months later, on 22 January 2017, the Politburo officially announced the creation of the Central Military-Civil Fusion Development Commission [中央军民融合发展委员会].¹²⁰

At its inception, the Central Military-Civil Fusion Development Commission featured Xi Jinping as its head, with Li Keqiang, Liu Yunshan, and Zhang Gaoli as members, as well as pulling together other members from the Central Committee, State Council, and the Central Military Commission. At its first meeting, Xi praised the decision to elevate MCF and emphasized the Commission's goals to "strengthen centralized and unified leadership, implement the overall national security concept and military-strategic guidelines under the new situation, highlight problem orientation, strengthen top-level design [...] and gradually build a military-civilian integrated national strategic system and capabilities."¹²¹ Thus, we can view this commission in a similar light to other LSGs. It exists to pull together distant parts of both the CCP, China's state administration, and the armed forces to create a space where unified strategies can be formulated. Delegates are likely expected to attend the meetings, and then return to their various departments and devise ways to implement Xi's goals as General Secretary and leader of the Commission.

It bears mentioning that the MCF strategy is quite ambitious in scale. As a strategy that straddles defense, economics, and national S&T development, it is expected to both revitalize the PLA's competitiveness and push China through the middle-income trap. And, intentional or not, it gives Xi a stronger hand as justification for creating more LSGs under his leadership, pooling more resources into China's armed forces, and it further spurs local Party committees to follow Xi's direction out of a desire for funding from the central government. For example, in March of 2018, the Central Military-Civil Fusion Development Commission announced the creation of the "National Military-Civil Fusion Innovation Demonstration Zone Construction Implementation Plan [国家军民

融合创新示范区建设实施方案]” which created a number of demonstration zones where high-tech R&D could be carried out under the umbrella of MCF.¹²² Substantial public funds go towards these projects and if local Party committees wish to be involved, they need to follow Xi’s plan. Reportedly, nearly 800 state-directed funds, totaling nearly 330 billion U.S. dollars, were established to aid Chinese industries and their MCF initiatives.¹²³ The Central Military-Civil Fusion Development Commission even said in 2018 that following Xi Jinping Thought is an essential component of MCF, stating: “to firmly implement the military-civilian fusion development strategy, we must adhere to the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, fully implement Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military, and implement the overall national security concept and military-strategic guidelines under the new situation.”¹²⁴

In summary, the bearing of MCF to the forefront of both the Chinese government and Chinese society is an important example of the power of Xi’s authority as the head of the CCP and its Central Committee. Through the podium afforded to him as leader of the CCP, Xi was able to platform his ideas about MCF, emphasize the need for it to be recognized on a national scale, oversee its acceptance as a national strategy, form a Commission with himself as the head to consolidate and refine said national strategy, as well as promote local government participation through Demonstration Zone projects launched by his Commission. It bears mentioning that these drives for MCF implementation extend beyond the Central Committee and its LSGs. The Central Military Commission also boasts an MCF Commission and a Science and Technology Commission [科学技术委员会].

Leading Group for National Defense and Military Reform of the Central Military Commission (2014)

While many LSGs are concentrated in the CCP Central Committee, this is certainly not the case for all of them. Xi bears many titles, among them is Chairman of the CMC, and as such, he also holds the power to create LSGs within the Central Military Commission. Similar to how chairing LSGs in the Central Committee allows Xi to reinforce his policy positions in the Party, LSGs within the CMC allow him to broadcast his chosen policy directions in the armed forces, hear thoughts from other CMC officials in a relatively informal setting, and find ways to ensure his positions are known to the heads of important organizations.

The CMC’s Leading Group for National Defense and Military Reform [中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组] held its first meeting in March of 2014.¹²⁵ At the time of formation, the LSG was led by Xi, with both Vice-Chairmen of the CMC, Xu Qiliang and Fan Changlong [范长龙], as Executive Deputy Leader and Deputy Leader, respectively. At the time, Xu Qiliang served concurrently as a member of Xi’s Leading Small Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reform. In keeping with these connections, Xi emphasized in his first speech that reforming the armed forces is an important aspect of comprehensively deepening reform.¹²⁶ However, the crux of the meeting seemed to foreshadow Xi’s developing plans for the PLA which would emerge in 2016, with Xi stating: “we must firmly grasp the modernization of military organization, it is necessary to reform the leadership and command system, force structure, and other aspects to support building a strong army.”¹²⁷

The strengths of LSGs in coordinating between stakeholders were demonstrated by events shortly after the Leading Group for National Defense and Military Reform was formed. Through his authority as CMC Chairman to create organizations within the CMC, Xi Jinping likely created this LSG as a way to promote his policy agenda. At the first meeting, he championed his other project LSGs and set the agenda of this LSG as part of its wider strategy. Xi then made the point that to see this strategy succeed, the members of the Leading Group for National Defense and Military Reform must support deep structural reforms. A little under two years later (January of 2016), Xi Jinping’s PLA undertook massive reforms that transformed the military’s organization,

command structure, and force structure: just as he emphasized what needed to happen during that first meeting. In this way, priorities set in one group with certain membership can then be transferred in sequence to other groups with different membership and jurisdiction. Likewise, after a major reform has been introduced, the LSG can function as a way to maintain loose oversight and keep the members focused. This can be seen in the meetings of the Leading Group for National Defense and Military Reform that took place after Xi Jinping's 2016 PLA reform. For example, in December of 2018, the group held its fourth meeting, which included both vice-chairmen of the CMC (Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia [张又侠]) and emphasized fully carrying out the reform plans.¹²⁸

In summary, different LSGs can fill different roles depending on their need, their membership, and the context of their creation. In the case of the Leading Group for National Defense and Military Reform, its effect appears to be one of preparation and agenda-setting. It precipitated Xi Jinping's PLA reforms and pulled in the needed officials and PLA heads. Further, it allowed Xi to both promote his other projects and keep the group members on-task once the PLA reforms began.

Changes to Existing LSGs

There are many more LSGs and Commissions that Xi Jinping has established, upgraded, and currently leads. This includes the Central United Front Work LSG [中央统战工作领导小组], the Central Commission for the Comprehensive Rule of Law [中央全面依法治国委员会], the Central Commission on Finance and Economics, and the Central Commission on Foreign Affairs, among others.¹²⁹ However, many of the functions and topic areas of these groups can overlap with existing organizations. Or as was the case in 2018, their functions and topic areas can be made to be redundant. In the changes made public in March of 2018, three organizations were displaced and subsequently disbanded: the Central Commission for Comprehensive Management of Social Safety [中央社会管理综合治理委员会], the Central Working Leading Small Group for Maintaining Stability [中央维护稳定工作领导小组], and the Central Working Leading Small Group for Preserving Maritime Rights and Interests [中央海洋权益工作领导小组].¹³⁰

The Central Commission for Comprehensive Management of Social Safety was a far-reaching Commission that touched upon many aspects of Chinese society. In its work, it published guidelines and procedures for handling wildly diverse topics such as school bullying, family court, labor dispute mechanisms, marriage and family disputes, anti-drug social worker programs, school cafeteria food safety, rural family protection measures, family planning for migrant families, and safety measures for explosive articles.¹³¹ As the broadness of its scope would suggest, the Commission frequently partnered with the State component of China's political apparatus and involved the court system, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Ministry of Justice. Perhaps most importantly though, the Commission was headed by Zhou Yongkang from 2007-2012, and then by his associate Meng Jianzhu [孟建柱] from 2012 until its dissolution in 2018.¹³²

Likewise, the Central Working Leading Small Group for Maintaining Stability seems to be linked to Zhou Yongkang through the Ministry of Public Security. Much like the Central Commission for Comprehensive Management of Social Safety, the Central Working Leading Small Group for Maintaining Stability was an LSG established to deal with threats to state power emanating from Chinese citizens. Its purpose was to coordinate between various departments to ensure timely responses to growing threats to Party stability. The former Director of the Central Working Leading Small Group for Maintaining Stability's Office, Yang Huanning [杨焕宁], appears to have links to the Ministry of Public Safety during Zhou Yongkang's time as head of the Department from 2007-2012. From May 2008 to October 2015, Yang Huanning served as the Executive Deputy Minister and Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee of the Ministry of Public Security.¹³³

Zhou Yongkang made his way up the CCP ranks by working through the security forces. Much like Xi Jinping's Commission on Comprehensively Deepening Reform, Zhou's Central Commission for Comprehensive Management of Social Safety was broad enough to connect him with large sections of both the state and Party bureaucracy. This, coupled with his position on the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, may have given Zhou a significant amount of power within Chinese politics. However, Xi Jinping, by using his position as head of the Central Committee, was able to dismantle Zhou's support networks in the name of anti-corruption. Zhou himself was famously arrested in 2014 as part of Xi's campaign, with Yang Huanning also being investigated and stripped of power in 2017.¹³⁴ Meng Jianzhu, likewise, succeeded Zhou Yongkang as Ministry of Public Security and Director of the Central Commission for Comprehensive Management of Social Safety. However, soon after, Meng had his LSG disbanded and has since been implied to be retired, presumably after the Central Commission for Comprehensive Management of Social Safety was disbanded.¹³⁵ Thus, with the fall of Zhou and his supporters, the LSGs that they operated through were made unnecessary by the National Supervision Commission, which replaced this power base with a Commission led by Yang Xiaodu, a veteran of Xi's rejuvenated Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

From this lens, it appears that the restructuring of these CCP Central Committee LSGs may contain political calculus designed to hamstring an adversary's political network and influence. Of course, not all reorganizations are of a purely cynical nature. The Central Working Leading Small Group for Preserving Maritime Rights and Interests appears to have been established at the height of the Diaoyu/Senkaku island dispute with Japan, and appears to have been disbanded to streamline China's national security response through the National Security Commission.¹³⁶ However, as General Secretary and leader of the CCP Central Committee, Xi Jinping has wide discretionary authority to restructure and disband these institutions for various purposes.

While on paper Xi may wield the same power and positions as Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin before him, ultimately Xi's authority comes from his will to remake and reform the Party to fit his image of a modern Chinese state. When faced with incentives ranging from dismissal to life imprisonment, many CCP officials choose to accept Xi's visions of change and his power to appoint, punish and prioritize.

Leading Small Groups in Provincial, Municipal and Prefectural Government Levels

In addition to Xi's direct authority over the CCP Central Committee and its various departments and organs, Xi also wields power through the ranks of ambitious Party members hoping to display their adherence to Xi Jinping Thought for the sake of their careers. Often this can come in the form of mirroring organizations and decision guidelines passed down from the CCP Central Committee.

For example, in September of the year 2000, Tianjin Municipal CCP Committee decided to establish the Binhai New Area Working Committee [滨海新区工作委员会] and the Binhai New Area Management Committee [滨海新区管理委员会] to improve decision-making capabilities over Tianjin's economic development.¹³⁷ However, it was not until October of 2005 that Tianjin received the focused attention of the CCP Central Committee proposing the development and opening of Tianjin Binhai New Area [天津滨海新区], and published an accompanying guideline. Following this directive, the Tianjin Municipal Party Committee convened and began organizing a

multitude of governmental small groups as a method to continue improving Tianjin's economic development. Reportedly, the Tianjin Municipal Party Committee established 12 new groups in the year 2014 alone.^{xi 138} Tianjin is not alone in this CCP Central Committee-inspired proliferation. Reportedly, Suojie Township [所街乡] in Hunan Province similarly established upwards of 38 working leading groups simultaneously in 2012.¹³⁹ This increase in provincial and local governmental LSGs follows the proliferation of LSG at the central level. It is estimated that between 2015 and 2017 alone the number of central LSGs increased by 103 percent.¹⁴⁰

Not only the number of LSGs but also their composition and focus often mirror those in the CCP Central Committee. There is a clear trend at the provincial and municipal levels Leading Small Groups that relate to Xi Jinping's big policy drives – deepening reform and MCF – have also multiplied. For example, in January of 2014, right as Xi Jinping's Central LSG for Comprehensively Deepening Reform was meeting for the first time, the Hubei Provincial Party Committee decided to both create a local Deepening Reform Small Group and to merge it into its own Provincial Party Committee Political Research Office [湖北省委政治研究室], creating a hybrid organization.¹⁴¹ These dual actions were a clear signal that deepening reform would be a central component of the Hubei Provincial Party Committee's political actions. Similar to deepening reform, MCF also gained significant traction among China's provincial and municipal governments, especially in regard to the policy of demonstration zones.

While demonstration zones had been around since at least 2010, following March of 2018, when the Central Military-Civil Fusion Development Commission announced the creation of the “National Military-Civil Fusion Innovation Demonstration Zone Construction Implementation Plan,” attention appears to have begun to shift towards aligning with Xi's MCF strategy. For example, in August 2018, the Zhejiang government unveiled plans for the formation of local research centers, parks, and bases for MCF development, and made a point of their history of MCF development.¹⁴² Similarly, Qingdao's West Coast New District [西海岸新区] issued a guideline in April of 2018 focusing on developing MCF technologies in the fields of marine vessels, biomedicine, aerospace, and new materials.¹⁴³

We can see that Xi's various positions afford him not only direct authority to implement structural changes, but also a considerable amount of clout for his ideas to diffuse through the various levels of the Chinese government. This can include local levels where he has no official jurisdiction. In this respect, Xi's authority is more of a signpost than a marching order. The path is shown, but the choice to follow through with his strategies is up to local Party officials. Xi has numerous sticks and carrots at his disposal. As demonstrated by Xi's work on the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, these tools can include the restructuring of hiring practices, positioning of allies in important organizations, and showing a willingness to promote those who align with his visions of a Chinese society. But, as demonstrated by the local government's taking-up of Xi's policy initiatives, sometimes Xi's position affords a softer power to influence eager provincial officials hoping to be noticed.

xi In general, during the Hu Jintao administration from 2002-2012 there was little change in the number of LSGs or their composition compared with Xi's emphasis on their use and number.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping sits at the nexus of three hierarchies. He wields power over the Chinese Communist Party through the General Secretary position, controls the PLA through his Chairmanship over the Central Military Commission, and governs the Chinese state as President of the People's Republic of China. These positions have allowed Xi to pursue an active agenda, with sweeping reforms and reorganizations not seen in decades.

There are some indications of pushback from leading officials that may prefer a slower pace of reform, those displaced and sidelined by Xi's reorganizations in the CCP Central Committee departments, and those in the provinces whose local power may be threatened by Xi's efforts to use his broad powers to shape the Party and country.¹⁴⁴ However, even if there are disagreements about how Xi should use his power and what direction the People's Republic should pursue, this dissent appears to be focused more on the Xi's policies rather than his ability to carry them out. Former leaders such as Hu and Jiang appear weaker not because they held less formal power than Xi, but rather because their image tended to be one of restraint and collective rule. Except for the lifting of the constitutional term limits for president, Xi holds no more formal power than his predecessors. That being said, the power granted to him is considerable when he chooses to use it.

Through the General Secretaryship, Xi is granted broad authority over important organizations housed within the Central Committee. It was through one such organization, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, that Xi first began his use of political initiatives. His seminal campaign on anti-corruption allowed him to place Wang Qishan and other allies in powerful positions, as well as pursue rival officials and disband their organizations. Xi has also chosen to utilize commissions and leading small groups to promote his initiatives, including structural reforms, national security efforts, and economic plans.

As Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xi was able to launch the most ambitious reforms of the PLA in its modern history. By his powers over force structure, Xi reformed the Military Region system into five Theater Commands, disbanded the PLA general departments and created numerous new departments directly under the authority of the CMC. Xi was further able to downsize the PLA Army and promote other services and officers who supported his reforms.

In short, Xi holds tremendous power as the head of the CCP, the PLA, and the PRC. Although his official titles do not differ from Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin, Xi's tenure thus far has stood in stark contrast to the Party's insistence on the appearance of collective rule that had characterized the post-Mao period. With an overture of intra-party inspections, censures, and arrests, Xi wasted no time in reforming the Party with a host of new appointments and LSGs. Further, Xi has left no clear successor or any indications of stepping down once his second term as General Secretary and President expires. While there have been reports of discontent among the ranks, Xi's appearance remains one of firm control of the Party and state apparatus.

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