A Pragmatic Approach to Power

Chinese Leadership Under President Xi Jinping

An Interview with Christopher K. Johnson

In this interview, Christopher Johnson discusses some of the earlier formative experiences that may have shaped the Chinese leader Xi Jinping’s political beliefs and policy preferences. Johnson’s measured analysis of Xi’s approach to power and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s dependency on public approval provides valuable insight into the inner workings of the CCP. The interview concludes by examining Xi’s relations with other leaders in Asia, including President Park Geun-hye of South Korea and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India.

Journal: Perhaps we could begin by discussing some of the earlier formative experiences that shaped Xi Jinping’s leadership style. What is Xi’s approach to policymaking and which core principles guide his political beliefs?

Johnson: On Xi’s formative experiences, there are two tone-setting aspects. First, he grew up during the 1950s in the Zhongnanhai leadership compound, so there was a certain headiness in that experience. Going from basically nothing to sitting in the Imperial Palace must have been quite an experience for Xi. Obviously, that’s also where Xi formed a lot of the critical bonds that he still enjoys with princelings, primarily, but with others as well.¹ So, the 1950s was crucial—a lofty and exciting period that Xi references regularly in his speeches.

¹ “Princeling” is an informal term that refers to the descendants of influential senior communist officials in the Communist Party of China.
Secondly, I think the corollary to his experience growing up in the Zhongnanhai compound is the purge of Xi’s father, Xi Zhongxun, and being “sent down” to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Being a “sent-down youth” impacted Xi in a variety of ways. The major lesson for him was that Chinese politics is a risky business. Xi understands that if he is going to play the political game, then he better fight hard and come out on top. Xi also understands that he is operating in a system with no—or at least very few—rules, which I think guides a lot of his actions. We see this, for example, with the anti-corruption campaign, where the goal is to keep all of his opponents or detractors off balance. Xi keeps a perpetual-motion machine constantly churning. After spending five years as understudy to former President Hu Jintao, one of the chief lessons Xi took away was the following: don’t be too deliberative, otherwise the others will coalesce against you.

Journal: It is difficult to talk about China under Xi without noting his anti-corruption campaign. In your assessment, would a campaign of this size and scale be possible with a different leader?

Johnson: I doubt it. Xi seems to have mobilized resources in a unique way. There were anti-corruption campaigns under former leaders Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, but they were campaigns with defined start and end points. One could argue that those campaigns were more political because they were designed to help the leaders consolidate power, especially given that both leaders ran their campaigns relatively early on in their tenures. Frankly, I think a lot of officials thought that Xi’s campaign was similar in that respect; many officials assumed that if they kept their heads down and waited it out, then the campaign would end once Xi successfully consolidated power. Apparently, there are still people who think the anti-corruption campaign will come to an end at some point, but I don’t see that happening. If anything, anti-corruption efforts seem to be ramping up yet again. For example, look at what’s happened in the financial sector over the last couple of weeks. We have also recently seen the detentions of major state-owned enterprise (SOE) chiefs.

Xi’s campaign is more pervasive, certainly in the military, which I think would have been the challenging part. When Jiang Zemin effectively forced the military out of business in 1998, large compensation was given, not too many arrests were made, and

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2 The term “sent-down youth” (zhiqing) refers to the young individuals who were sent to the rural countryside as part of Mao Zedong’s “Down to the Countryside Movement,” which aimed to root out the bourgeois mindset. Approximately seventeen million youth, including many in current Chinese leadership, were sent down as a result of this policy.

3 Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign began after the conclusion of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in November 2012. Under Xi’s guidance as general secretary, more than 100 high-ranking officials and 100,000 people have been indicted for corruption.

4 In the wake of the stock market’s tumble this past the summer, the government cracked down on traders suspected of fraud and irregularities. In November 2015, authorities detained Xu Xiang, who runs the hedge-fund Zexi Investment, for suspected insider trading and stock-price manipulation, which served as a clear warning to other financial industry professionals.
so on. However, one could argue that, even after these efforts, corruption still prospered under Jiang Zemin. Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, for example, were both his close supporters. So, either Jiang Zemin knew about their corruption and tolerated it, or he didn’t know about it—both of which are fairly damning. Xi Jinping has definitely taken a more severe approach regarding anti-corruption efforts in the military. He has also taken a different approach in the security services. One could argue that what makes Xi’s campaign unique is that he is doing a lot of the damage in the most sensitive areas.

Journal: In terms of the anti-corruption campaign, what is Xi’s endgame?

Johnson: I think Xi is trying to accomplish a couple of things. A challenge right now is that folks want to distill the anti-corruption campaign down to one or two motivations, painting the campaign as either purely crass and political with Xi as a megalomaniac like Mao, or as an attempt to ultimately establish the rule of law in China. My view is that it’s much more complicated and nuanced. For one, Xi’s motivations differ by the level of the target. Certainly at the so-called “tiger” level—the high level officials—the campaign is pretty political, so we don’t see many friends of Xi being wrapped up at the high levels. At the “flies” level—the mid-and-lower-level officials—I think his motivation is very different. The campaign at this lower level is designed to end practices that are alienating the Party from the public. One of the key messages of the anti-corruption campaign is changing the so-called “ugly face of the regime,” which includes shakedowns for licenses (or whatever else officials might need), the selling of hukou, and the public security bureau’s harassment of the people. All low-level forms of graft are problematic for the regime, and the campaign is, in part, a classic Chinese tactic to convince people that the emperor is great, and that it is actually the local officials who are evil and corrupt.

Yet, the campaign at the “tiger” level indicates that it is more than just pure politics. The Chinese public likes the blood sport of purging high-level officials, so it is effective. But, targeting all of these senior-level officials, including people in the Politburo Standing Committee, reveals that corruption reaches all the way to the top. At some point the public might begin to think that the entire apple barrel is rotten and needs to be tipped over. Xi must be aware of this risk, so I think this speaks to his greater tolerance for risk than Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin.

Journal: How does Mao Zedong’s legacy live on today in Xi’s China? In what ways do we see the Cultural Revolution linger on in current political practices?

Johnson: I think the legacy lives on in several ways. Xi has been very clear since he came into power that you cannot separate the first thirty years of the regime from what happened afterward. In fact, the so-called Document No. 9 that was released publicly

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5 Throughout the anti-corruption campaign, Xi has vowed to target both “tigers” and “flies,” which respectively refers to powerful senior officials and low-level bureaucrats.
in 2013 by the propaganda types in the Party remains a theme that Xi harps on publicly as well.\(^6\) Xi fundamentally rejects the notion that Mao was bad, and everything after Deng was good. However, the 120th anniversary of Mao’s birth in December 2013 presented a real opportunity if Xi wanted to go “big time” on the Mao cult, but instead he kept it fairly understated. Another subtle example of Mao’s lingering presence occurred when Xi sent a wreath to Maoist ideologue Deng Liqun’s funeral. Deng very diligently went after Xi’s father in the 1950s and 1960s, yet Xi sent the wreath anyway. So, Xi is very much balancing the factional pieces within the Party.

I think what’s interesting is that China currently has a generation of fairly senior-level officials who have all had some kind of formative experience related to the Cultural Revolution. These officials were scapegoated, sent down to the countryside, or some combination of both. There is a greater sensitivity among those who experienced the Cultural Revolution—academics and officials alike—to signs of reemergence. Given the current atmosphere, many are watching and wondering whether China is heading in that direction.

Some of the “god-king” elements of Xi Jinping’s leadership style do cause people to worry, but their worry is not so much that the phenomenon of the Cultural Revolution is happening again. Instead, they worry that the effort after the Cultural Revolution to prevent such a concentration of power has come under some form of assault. Typically, when a top leader runs into problems politically—if the problems are severe and the leader is powerful enough—then a full-scale assault on the bureaucracy comes next. Based on what did and did not come out of the Fifth Plenum of the 18th Party Congress, we are seeing signs of a potential bureaucratic shake-up. And that would certainly have Cultural Revolution undertones.

**Journal:** When Xi replaced predecessor Hu Jintao in 2012, a flurry of reports attempted to answer the question, “Who is Xi Jinping?” Many scholars predicted Xi would be a reformer, while others remained skeptical. Today, analysis of Xi and the future trajectory of the Communist Party of China (CPC) remains fairly divided. In your opinion, what is the biggest misconception about Xi?

**Johnson:** A huge misconception is that Xi is weaker than he appears. I don’t know if that is actually the biggest misconception, but I would say it is the riskiest misconception. Xi is powerful enough to affect change in the way that he wants. If the analysis is that Xi is weak and manipulated by other forces, then there is an underlying notion that Xi would act in accordance with what others such as the United States want—if only he weren’t constrained by forces like the military or SOE chiefs. That is not correct. Xi is the force directing a majority of what we are currently seeing in China. I think

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\(^6\) Document No. 9, also known as “Concerning the Situation in the Ideological Sphere,” is a document first published in July 2012 and circulated within the Communist Party of China. The document warns of seven dangerous values, including Western constitutional democracy and criticism of the Party’s past errors.
the other common misconception is that Xi is a megalomaniac—a power-mad, Mao-like figure. My view is that Xi remains a pragmatist at his core, and that his concentration of power is a means to an end, rather than an end in and of itself.

_Journal:_ How has Xi concentrated and consolidated his power since he became general secretary?

_Johnson:_ There are three key factors. The first is Xi’s ability to exploit his background. I would argue that Xi’s “princeling” status gives him a unique understanding of the way the Chinese system works, and how to manipulate it. In other words, the princeling status gives him what you might call a “DNA map” that is particular to those who have spent their lives steeped in the system—a network of insiders, particularly across key bureaucracies such as the military, Party organs, and even business. This network is something that recent predecessors like Hu Jintao did not enjoy upon arrival and instead had to attempt to build. Even Jiang Zemin had to build the so-called “Jianghai” group over time. Xi’s connections have helped him do certain things right from the beginning, including immediately securing the Central Military Commission chairmanship and establishing leading groups like the National Security Commission and the Comprehensively Deepening Reform Leading Group. The National Security Commission was something that both Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin tried to form, but couldn’t accomplish in their tenures. The National Security Commission and leading groups have been a real enabler for Xi’s further concentration of power.

The second factor is decisiveness. Xi has moved quickly. My sense is that Xi was working with a kitchen cabinet group of advisors who had a fully-baked plan by the time he became general secretary. There’s no way anyone could come up with something as comprehensive as the Third Plenum document during the first year in power while also trying to consolidate authority—unless they already had 80 percent of the plan in the can before arriving. Xi’s initial remarks on the day he was elected general secretary clearly signaled the direction that the Party would head.

The third and final element is the coercive toolkit that Xi has developed. There are three aspects to this toolkit: the anticorruption campaign, the mass-line effort, and the stultifying political retrenchment. All three parts have been designed to instill a lot of fear in officialdom in order to make officials believe that they are in an unsteady position.

_Journal:_ U.S.-China relations are strained due to disagreements over cybersecurity, human rights, and maritime security, with some experts even going so far as to call the recent atmosphere a “tipping point” in U.S.-China relations. What role will individual leaders play in resolving rising tensions? Ideally, what should we see from the Obama and Xi administrations in order to manage these tensions?

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7 The “Jianghai group,” also called to as the “Jiang clique” or “Shanghai clique,” refers to a group of officials who rose to power in connection to the Shanghai municipal administration under former General Secretary Jiang Zemin.
Johnson: I think we are seeing some attempts to manage tensions, but the challenge is that the Obama-Xi summit in September provided the last opportunity within President Obama’s tenure to set things on a more strategic plane. I think the summit was a missed opportunity. Although President Xi and President Obama are able to meet at the G-20 and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, these gatherings are generally single-hour meetings, most of which is consumed by translation and the exchange of “must-do” talking points. In reality, these meetings allow for less than fifteen minutes of actual conversation, as opposed to the hours that were available during the various summits.

My sense is that few understandings were reached at the most recent summit in September 2015, especially on critical issues such as cybersecurity and freedom of navigation. A challenge is that, on the one hand, the two nations must resolve some of these issues because they are sensitive at a senior level. Yet, on the other hand, we have the presidents of these two powerful countries and economies talking about extremely “in the weeds” stuff, such as construction on reefs in the South China Sea and specific cybersecurity cases. My question is this: where were the mid-level officials who are supposed to clear the underbrush so that senior leaders can do what they need to do? I think a big part of the answer is Xi’s concentration of power. Nobody in the Chinese system today wants to take a risk and say, for example, “I’ve got a great idea on cyber,” unless they know Xi’s exact mindset on the matter.

However, I think something we saw coming out of the summit was a commitment to try and emphasize the positive. Daniel Russel, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, recently gave a public speech that heavily emphasized the positives in the relationship, while also being very clear about the United States’ “no-gos,” particularly on cyber and freedom of navigation. My sense is that U.S.-China relations are going to be pretty testy, because it’s too late in the administration for someone on the Obama side to be named a “China Czar,” if you will (and that is a very tricky thing to do). I think that needs to be done, but it probably will wait until the next administration. However, even then it’s unclear if the new administration would have the thought or desire to name a “China Czar.”

I think we need something beyond the mechanisms we already have because current mechanisms are not solving these problems. We have the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), the JCC (Joint Coordination Committee meetings under the U.S.-China Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Technology (PUNT) Agreement), and various working-level meetings where groups of people decamp from their respective capitals to meet. While good stuff happens at these meetings, this process doesn’t deal with the fundamental issues. To deal with fundamental issues, I think we need more high-level engagement; yet, the reality is that both President Xi and President Obama are busy. We need individuals just below that most senior level—people who are trusted by their respective leaders—to have a continuing dialogue. That’s my sense of what is necessary, but I don’t think we’ll see any changes to the U.S.-China engagement process until the changeover following the U.S. election.
Journal: Switching gears, what is your analysis of Xi’s relations with other leaders in Asia? For example, in September, Xi declared the China-ROK relationship “the best-ever national relationship in history.” Xi also recently met with President Ma Ying-jeou of Taiwan. How else do we see Xi building strategic relations in the region, and are these relationships sustainable?

Johnson: Xi’s relationship-building efforts are an example of risk-taking. The Ma-Xi hui (Ma-Xi meeting) is certainly a risk, though some would argue less so because Xi is engaging with a leader who is leaving office before long. It’s hard for me to tell whether that meeting is more of a Hail Mary pass to help the Kuomintang Party (KMT), or whether Xi actually thought it was the right thing to do. Either way, it was a bold move. I don’t think, for example, Hu Jintao would have met with Ma Ying-jeou. Of course, there was likely a lot of talk upfront and the meeting was largely just for show—but Xi still did it, which was risky.

As for China’s relationship with South Korea, I think this is a situation in which President Park Geun-hye is trying to walk a fine line between acknowledging South Korea’s economic dependency on China, yet remain close to the United States in the security sphere. My own view is that after Xi and Park meet, they both walk away saying, “I got what I wanted.” It’s that kind of relationship. When Xi diverted into a security-oriented space at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and asked whether Park would sign the CICA Joint Communique, which included language on “Asia for Asians,” the answer from South Korea was “no.” I think “no” will continue to be South Korea’s answer on the security side. Their relationship becomes more complicated on issues like the 2015 China Victory Day Parade. I thought it was strange that President Park chose to attend, but I think the goal was really to demonstrate “South Korea is here, while North Korea is either absent or their representative is seventeen rows back.” The interesting piece will be whether South Korea views China as the answer to their North Korea problem, as opposed to relying on the U.S.-led alliance structure.

China’s relations with nations throughout the region are difficult, but Xi recently had good meetings with Singapore and Vietnam. I think China’s relationship with Vietnam will be driven by Vietnam’s own political transition process. If the current Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung becomes the party secretary, that could make things more complicated, because he is more on the pro-United States side than the pro-China side. The current sitting party secretary is more the latter, so we will have to wait and see.

China’s relationship with India is very interesting. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Xi shouldn’t be getting along. I think there is a mutual recognition that they both sort of hate each other, but they find a way to at least have a fairly viable commercial relationship.

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8 At the time of this interview, the ruling KMT party and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) were gearing up for elections in January 2016. The DPP is known for its pro-independence stance.
Modi’s pragmatic approach towards a relationship with Xi should serve as a lesson for those in the U.S. strategic community who seek to return to the “democratic pincer movement” in order to ensnare China between Japan and India. India is not going to play that game.

There has been a lot of criticism surrounding Xi’s foreign policy, but I come back to the core point that it has been at least reasonably effective. One issue we hear frequently is that China’s foreign policy is counterproductive. Perhaps, but China is getting away with it so far. For example, take Scarborough Shoal in the Philippines: the facts are that it used to be controlled by the Philippines and now it’s controlled by China, resulting in the first handover of a land feature in twenty-odd years without firing a shot—and without any consequences. So, I think Xi’s steady game plan has some effectiveness to it. Of course, the economy remains a big piece of this plan. Regional neighbors feel more bound to China when the economy is doing well because they want to take advantage of this economic opportunity. The effort on the Chinese part becomes more complicated if there is a serious slowdown in the economy because then the snarling teeth show more than the outstretched hand.

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Christopher Johnson was interviewed by Kenneth Lee and Alex Rued on November 9, 2015.