Xi Jinping's Bureaucracy in 2025: A Critique

By

Jumel G. Estrañero and Fatima J. Saquilayan

Chinese Premiere Xi Jinping remains firmly in control of China's political landscape, with no visible plan for succession. Xi's firm control over the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is unprecedented in modern China, especially after abolishing presidential term limits in 2018. His lack of a clear successor suggests an intent to rule indefinitely, which may ensure stability in the short term but creates uncertainty for the future.

Historically, authoritarian regimes without succession plans often face power struggles when the leader eventually dies, retires, or is overthrown. The absence of a designated heir could lead to internal conflicts within the CCP when Xi is gone.

The only possible threat to his authority could emerge from within the security apparatus. Furthermore, his grip on power is not static; it is continuously reinforced through persistent anti-corruption efforts and CCP rectification campaigns. In other words, Xi Jinping's entrenched control over China's political system and the mechanisms he employs to maintain power was and remains prominent.

Political Variables

The lack of a clear successor suggests that Xi intends to rule indefinitely, breaking with the leadership norms established after Mao Zedong's era. This raises concerns about political stability in the long term, as the absence of a transition plan increases the risk of a power struggle when he eventually leaves office.

Also, it means a weakness of political opposition that emphasizes that opposition within China has largely disappeared, with dissenters either forced into exile or silenced through political repression. This suggests a highly controlled political environment where resistance is ineffective. While this strengthens Xi's immediate grip on power, it does not necessarily eliminate discontent. Rather, it forces opposition underground. If economic hardships or political scandals arise, suppressed grievances could resurface, potentially destabilizing the regime—meaning that discontent is potentially creating instability in the future.

Although Xi appears unchallenged, the security apparatus is a possible source of opposition. Security forces are crucial to maintaining authoritarian rule, and, if internal divisions emerge, they can pose a serious threat to his leadership. Thus, if divisions emerge within China's security forces whether due to policy disagreements, economic struggles, or leadership disputes, Xi's position could be at risk.

While there is no clear indication of this happening, it suggests that control over the military and intelligence agencies remains a key factor in his rule. To wit, in authoritarian regimes, the military and intelligence agencies are often the key enforcers of the leader's rule, but they can also become sources of internal opposition. However, so far, he has maintained tight control over the military and state security agencies through purges and loyalty tests.

There is also a role of anti-corruption and party rectification campaigns in Xi's bureaucracy and leadership. Rather than merely consolidating power in a passive way, Xi actively reinforces his authority through continuous anti-corruption drives and ideological

campaigns to eliminate political rivals and maintain loyalty within the CCP. While these measures strengthen his rule, such campaigns may also create resentment among officials who fear they could become targets.

Aging Political Leadership

The top leadership is tilted in Xi Jinping's favor. However, this top leadership is aging. An aging leadership also means that many of Xi's key supporters may retire or pass away, potentially opening room for new political dynamics that he may not fully control.

In 2027, the current Politburo will have an average age above 68. Should they be renominated then, the average age of Politburo members would be above 73 on the eve of the next Party Congress and current Central Committee members are not far behind. Their time horizon will become shorter, and if no potential successor appears, their political position will become increasingly vulnerable. Again, a defining feature of Xi's leadership is the lack of a designated successor, breaking from previous CCP norms that aimed to ensure stability through planned transitions. Without a clear heir, uncertainty will grow among the party elite, increasing the risk of political maneuvering or factional struggles as different groups seek to position themselves for leadership roles. This uncertainty could weaken Xi's grip on power over time, especially as leaders begin to consider their own political futures beyond his rule.

As the current leadership ages and their career time horizons shrink, their incentives may shift. Rather than unwavering loyalty to Xi, some officials might begin looking for alternative paths to secure their personal or factional interests. If no successor emerges, competition among different factions could intensify, creating a fragile political environment. Additionally, older officials may become less effective in governance, potentially exacerbating policy stagnation or mismanagement, further weakening the regime's overall stability.

Unless Xi Jinping changes his basic formula to ensure support and discourage any debate, his power will become brittle, and the likelihood of a succession crisis will increase. His leadership strategy requires grooming a successor or adjusting his approach to elite management. While his current control appears strong, the absence of institutionalized succession mechanisms makes a future power struggle more likely. Historically, power vacuums in authoritarian regimes often lead to internal conflicts, and China could face a similar scenario if Xi does not prepare a clear transition plan.

There are also nuanced views of Xi Jinping's governance style, highlighting both his consolidation of power and the underlying complexities within China's political and economic landscape. Despite Xi's centralization of power and strong grip on influence, Chinese bureaucracies remain highly fragmented, with institutional silos, rival factions, and competition among individuals. This contradicts the idea of a fully unified authoritarian system, suggesting that power struggles still play a role in policy decisions.

Clearly, there is Xi's ability to enforce policy shifts while maintaining ideological rigidity, as well as the role of elite competition in shaping China's future. Additionally, the influence of princelings (descendants of revolutionary leaders) remains significant, particularly in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and financial institutions. While the next leader may not necessarily be a princeling, elite clans could act as key power brokers, determining leadership transitions behind the scenes.

At a deeper level, there is a pattern in Xi's governance. Initial inflexibility followed by strategic reversals or rigidity then with certain pragmatic adjustments. When policies face

resistance or cause unintended consequences, this would be addressed through a "pullback pattern" or "rear-view mirror approach" that are evident in key crises, including: the 2015 stock market crisis, the COVID-19 lockdowns, the 2020 real estate crash, and the Sino-American trade war.

This suggests that Xi is a risk-taker but not reckless; meaning, he is willing to implement bold policies but is also pragmatic enough to change course when necessary. However, these reversals are often framed in a way that protects his authority, shifting blame onto subordinates or external factors.

Xi's political capital plays in a "selective policy flexibility versus ideological rigidity." While Xi shows pragmatism in adjusting economic policies, his core ideological agenda remains unchanged. His governance remains centered around: reinforcing ideology; promoting "struggle" (斗争); and maintaining a strong international posture. Even in areas where Xi has shown flexibility such as real estate bailouts or fiscal stimulus, shifts are constrained by his broader ideological commitments.

Xi is also deepening policies that predated his rule. He has an affinity for the self-strengthening movement of the Qing empire, summed up by the famous maxim, "Chinese learning as the essence, Western learning for practical use" (中学为体, 西学为用). Republican China sought help from Germany to modernize its arms industry and sent students on scholarships to the United States. The best-known case of this is rocket scientist Qian Xuesen who, after leaving the United States in 1955, led China's ballistic development.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty was the basis for what is called the largest technology transfer in history. Much of this focused on industry and infrastructure, but it also involved education and the training of scientists, including in the nuclear field.

The Sino-Soviet rift inaugurated a period of closure, but Mao Zedong nonetheless launched several "big projects" during the Great Leap Forward. They are recalled today to justify the present large-scale policies.

At the end of the Cultural Revolution, Zhou Enlai, followed by Deng Xiaoping, hailed the "four modernizations" (四个现代化) that put the accent on big science again. Since the early 1960s, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has never ceased from engaging in research and development on new weapons, serving as a harbor for scientists in times of political turmoil or during more recent anti-corruption campaigns.

A chief aim of China's normalization with the United States was to acquire key technologies. From former US Presidents Richard Nixon to Jimmy Carter's presidency, which was the heyday of the US convergence with China against the Soviet Union, supercomputers (supposedly for climate predictions), nuclear knowledge, radar installations, and many other dual-use technologies were shared. Large contingents of Chinese students underwent education and training abroad, mainly in the United States.

Successively, we can observe that Xi's foreign policy adaptations are evident with strategic pauses. There is a pattern of assertiveness followed by recalibration. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), once a cornerstone of China's global strategy, has seen a decline in outward investments and loans, possibly due to economic slowdowns and concerns over debt sustainability. Additionally, in response to changing global dynamics, particularly under a potential Trump second presidency (2024–2028), China appears to be cautiously reassessing its relationships with key nations, including India, Japan, and the UK. This suggests that while Xi

projects strength internationally, he is also willing to adjust diplomatic strategies to navigate shifting geopolitical realities.

Implication and Conclusion

Per its implication, while Xi's control appears secure for now, the long-term consequences of his rule remain uncertain. The suppression of opposition, lack of a succession plan, and reliance on internal purges could make the political system more fragile over time. If economic challenges or elite divisions intensify, his grip on power may face unexpected tests.

Xi's leadership is characterized by strong, centralized control, but his dominance is not necessarily permanent. His reliance on security forces, ideological campaigns, and repression keeps him in power, yet these same factors could generate internal tensions. Whether his rule remains stable or faces future challenges depends on how well he navigates potential economic, political, and internal security risks.

While Xi Jinping maintains firm control over the CCP, the aging leadership and the absence of a succession plan introduce long-term vulnerabilities. If these issues remain unaddressed, they could lead to political uncertainty, elite fragmentation, and a potential succession crisis. Xi's ability to navigate these challenges will determine the long-term stability of his rule and the CCP's future.

Xi Jinping's leadership is characterized by a mix of ideological rigidity and strategic pragmatism. While he has consolidated power, elite competition, bureaucratic infighting, and security apparatus tensions remain underlying factors in China's political landscape. His policy approach follows a recognizable pattern: firm initial positions, followed by controlled reversals, when necessary, which helps him maintain authority while adapting to challenges. However, as China faces economic pressures, elite power struggles, and an evolving international environment, the long-term sustainability of this governance model remains uncertain.

Jumel G. Estrañero is a defense, security, and political analyst and a university lecturer in the Philippines. Fatima J. Saquilayan, JD, CRSP, CPHR, is a Certified Data Privacy Officer (DPO), Certified Recruitment and Selection Professional, Certified Professional in Human Resources (CPHR), and a full-fledged Arbitrator approved by the Office for Alternative Dispute Resolution, Department of Justice. The ideas are the author's own.