

The Looking Glass

The myth of the master strategist Part 2: Xi Jinping and getting China wrong

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The September edition of the *Looking Glass* took a critical look at the mythos that has built up around Vladimir Putin as a master strategist. In this issue, we turn our attention to the conventional wisdom that Xi Jinping's China constitutes a cunning and ideologically driven foe with a well-developed strategy to overturn Western dominance.

From Michael Pillsbury's 2015 [100 Year Marathon](#) to Aaron Friedberg's 2022 [Getting China Wrong](#) and a spate of opinion pieces in the media, it is now customary to claim that Beijing has a coherent and long-term strategy that integrates all elements of national power to ensure China replaces the United States as global hegemon. It is often coupled with the view that both Maoist dictums of strategy and obscure (at least, to Western minds) principles of ancient Chinese statecraft have informed this master plan. Yet, it has also been cunningly [concealed](#) from the rest of the world by a highly secretive and conspiratorial Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

This narrative has become pervasive in recent years. Former US Vice-President Mike Pence and former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted its core themes in set-piece speeches during the Trump presidency (2016–2020). Pompeo, for instance, [declaimed](#) that Xi Jinping espoused a 'virulent strain of communism' and that 'it's this ideology that informs his decades-long desire for global hegemony of Chinese communism'. Closer to home, in a 2017 [speech](#) to an audience of Australian government officials, the former adviser to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, John Garnaut, claimed that to understand contemporary China one had to understand it was ruled by a new (!) 'totalitarian' communist ideology. This had been 'grafted' onto 'the classical Chinese dynastic system' and was an ideology obsessed with subverting the 'liberal democratic' West.

There are at least three problems with such thinking:

1. It exaggerates the role of ideology as a *singular* (or even primary) causal explanation for Chinese behaviour under Xi Jinping.
2. It understates how China's foreign policy and 'grand strategy' have been just as contingent as other states on international and domestic politics.



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3. Claims of Chinese strategic coherence minimise the effect of the major pathologies in China's domestic policymaking process.

Ideology: important but not determinative

Given the opacity of the CCP and the Chinese state, it is understandable why external observers emphasise official ideology as the key to understanding Chinese behaviour. For those who know where to look, official ideological directives and explications on all manner of policy issues are readily obtainable. The propensity of the Party-state to frame such ideological strictures via the medium of the 'core' leader, and the reality of that leader's role at the apex of the institutions of the Party-state, also make divining the 'operational code' of that leader a natural focus for study.

So, there are very good reasons to take CCP ideology seriously. But as Joseph Torigian [notes](#), 'sweeping statements about ideology's *decisive* influence can obscure more than they illuminate'. This is particularly the case if we take official ideological pronouncements as definitive blueprints for action and fail to understand the political context in which they are made.

US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was famously fond of opening Stalin's *Problems of Leninism* when analysing the Soviet Union's behaviour because he believed it was 'the present-day Communist bible ... [that] gives us the same preview Hitler gave in *Mein Kampf*'. Are we, in turn, to believe that the answers to understanding and predicting Chinese behaviour now lie in Xi Jinping's ideological utterances?

According to former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, the answer would seem to be 'yes'. Rudd, writing in the November/December 2022 issue of [Foreign Affairs](#), argues that 'Xi's rise has meant nothing less than the return of Ideological Man' in China, where 'ideology drives policy more often than the other way around'. In Rudd's view, Xi has 'pushed politics to the Leninist left, economics to the Marxist left, and foreign policy to the nationalist right'.

Yet, how we measure the causal effect of ideas on policy is extremely unclear, which makes claims like these about as analytically rigorous as guesswork. What makes matters worse is analysis of ideology offers a tempting vision of policy directions but one with no access to policymakers, bureaucratic information and [data](#) or, increasingly, [China](#) itself, which might help confirm or refute it. As Jessica Batke and Oliver Melton [noted](#) on the eve of the last Party Congress in 2017, 'close readings of party documents can reveal a shift in policy concepts', but they often 'depend heavily upon assumptions that paper over information gaps, or are structured in ways that exclude policy considerations and important variables'.

In fact, [ideology](#) 'is generally only one of many probable and partial causes of policies'. This is the case in not only the liberal democratic world but also authoritarian ones. Consider Soviet foreign policy under Stalin. In contrast to Dulles' confident assertion that he had Stalin's 'playbook' in his hands, a wave of [scholarship](#) has since demonstrated that Stalin's ideologically driven strategic maximalism coexisted with tactical retreat, compromise and flexibility. Stalin's foreign policy, as Nigel Gould-Davies [notes](#), demonstrated that, 'There is no necessary connection between the radicalism of ultimate objectives and the choice of means to achieve them.'

Why, then, should we assume China is somehow different? China, as Frederick Tiewes pointedly [observes](#), 'is not a totally unique political system where broader comparative considerations of bureaucratic interests and conflict structures are irrelevant'. Politics in China – as anywhere else – is about conflict, and policy outcomes are as much about how such conflict is mediated through organisational, institutional and bureaucratic processes, including ideology. Moreover, as [new waves](#) of [scholarship](#) on post-Mao CCP elite politics suggest, the politics of leadership transitions have been driven by the 'brass knuckles' affair of who retains or gains power, and not about ideological differences.

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This is an important insight given that some [recent speculation](#) about [emerging](#) ‘splits’ within the top level of the CCP have been framed as one between supposedly ‘reformist’ or ‘technocratic’ elements associated with Premier Li Keqiang on the one hand, and Xi’s supposedly more ideologically committed retainers on the other. Such speculation tends to ignore two factors: the trend of elite politics under Xi; and the question of whether personalisation of power necessarily adversely affects institutional power. With respect to the first of these issues, under Xi the [trend](#) has clearly been a return to ‘politics manipulating norms rather than norms governing politics’, as demonstrated by his reinstatement of purges (mainly in the name of ‘anti-corruption’) as a [norm](#) of party life and discipline, and the abrogation of the norm of term limits established under Deng Xiaoping. On the second issue, there is evidence both from China and a broader [comparative](#) context that personalisation of power in authoritarian systems does not necessarily amount to a weakening of the power of institutions. In the case of the CCP, it can be [argued](#) that Xi’s consolidation of power has stabilised, and perhaps even reinvigorated, the Party itself. Here, for instance, Xi’s ‘anti-corruption’ campaign [emerges](#) as ‘politically motivated in an organizational sense, attempting to prevent corruption from spiraling out of control and reinstating at least a basic sense of discipline among the ranks of the Communist Party’.

More broadly, as [Guoquan Wu](#) persuasively argues, the core tension within the Party under Xi has not been based on ideological differences at all. Rather, it has focused upon different approaches to ‘two fundamental *institutional* characteristics of the CCP regime’. These are the Leninist drive for the leader to ‘rely on a purge of his rivals and promotion of loyalists’ to consolidate power and implement policy; and the ‘built-in self-contradiction’ of a partially marketised economy and the CCP’s monopoly on political power.

The core distinction between Xi and his predecessors as Chairman of the CCP is how to resolve or at least [manage](#) this contradiction: ‘From Deng Xiaoping through Jiang Zemin and to Hu Jintao, the CCP leaderships prior to Xi chose to promote market capitalism to maintain the CCP dictatorship. But Xi sees huge pitfalls in market capitalism for his regime and, accordingly, he is determined to struggle against these pitfalls to preserve the CCP dictatorship.’ The distinction is therefore not ideological. Rather, it reflects the nature of the power-political calculation that Xi and those aligned with him have made about how best to secure the CCP’s continued monopoly on power.

The contingency of Chinese foreign policy and grand strategy

With respect to Chinese foreign policy and grand strategy the ideology-is-all approach tends to [assume](#) that current policy ‘extends smoothly and perennially backwards’. Here too, however, ideology is one of many probable and partial causes of policy, and there has been substantial variation over time in the choice of means to attain policy goals. This has been driven not by shifts in ideology per se, but rather by the Party-state’s responses to contingent events and dynamics, both at the international and domestic level.

The Party-state has had a clear set of aspirational foreign policy goals guided by its ideological convictions since 1949. Most importantly, although the CCP has (since Deng’s reforms) discarded much of the Marxist content of its Marxist–Leninist ideology, it has steadfastly [retained](#) the Leninist state and the ‘vanguard’ party – the ‘political half of the Lenin–Stalin model imported circa 1950’. A consequence of this is [Xi Jinping’s and the CCP’s](#) continued belief that *only* a disciplined vanguard party can deliver modernisation and the ‘China Dream’ of ‘great national rejuvenation’. While circumstances have dictated ‘temporary cooperation with the self-interested capitalists’, the CCP [believes](#) ‘that they lead an ideological-political system distinct from and in opposition to those of the capitalist world’ and these ‘two worlds cannot be permanently reconciled’.

This has been the key theme linking all of China’s post-Mao rulers. How each have sought to ensure the continuation of the Party-state itself and the growth of national power has, however, fluctuated. Such fluctuation, as we discuss below, has resulted from the Party-state’s reactions to contingent events at both the international and domestic levels.

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Deng to Hu: ideological aspirations tempered by reality

Under Deng, China temporarily accepted the bipolar reality of the late Cold War to ensure its security, economic development and recognition of China's status as a major and legitimate actor in international affairs. Although this was driven by the logic of Deng's 'reform and opening' program domestically (since China required a stable and peaceful international order in which to focus on economic development), it was also [reinforced](#) by Deng's perceptions about the global balance of power that saw the Soviet Union as China's primary security threat and rapprochement with the US as a means of both balancing Moscow and [accessing](#) American markets and technology. Simultaneously, Beijing sought to improve relations with the developing world by jettisoning the Mao years' pretension of leading such states towards revolution. Instead, China [favoured](#) 'claiming only fellowship with that group' and expressed a desire for an 'anti-hegemonism', which could be interpreted as desiring subordination to neither the US nor the Soviet Union.

[Deng](#) had hoped for '[multipolarity](#)' (the weakening of US and Soviet dominance) to become the prevailing trend of international politics into the 1990s. However, the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989 and the imposition of international sanctions on China combined with the First Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 instead signalled the beginning of the 'unipolar moment' of US predominance. That predominance was [underscored](#) by the US military's harnessing of the 'revolution in military affairs' during the First Gulf War. For Deng, the Soviet collapse demonstrated the necessity of simultaneously maintaining firm one-party rule and continued pursuit of economic development, while the Gulf War underlined the technological gap between the People's Liberation Army and the US military.

This [required](#) a foreign policy focused on developing multiple regional and global linkages to accelerate economic growth, resolve longstanding disputes with neighbours and combat the perceived ill effects of continued US predominance. As such, it was [designed](#) 'to maintain the conditions conducive to China's continued growth', while reducing 'the likelihood others would unite to oppose China'.

Deng's successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao largely maintained this course. The strategy and discourse of '[peaceful rise](#)' that emerged under Hu, for example, emphasised that China would continue to pursue development through further integration with economic globalisation to 'catch up with medium-level developed countries'; and privilege preferences for cooperation, multilateralism and regionalism' within the practice of its foreign policy.

The replacement of 'peaceful rise' by the more anodyne term 'peaceful development' in 2006 did not alter the essence of this strategy. Indeed, in 2007 Premier Wen Jiabao [asserted](#) that a posture of peaceful development would send 'a clear message to the world that China will achieve its development mainly through its own efforts', and mitigate 'misgivings in the international community that China is bound to engage in external plundering and expansion when it reaches a certain stage of development'.

This [rationale](#) was also evident in Hu's subsequent 'harmonious world' rhetoric, in which 'harmony' signified 'the importance of the coexistence of diversified civilizations' and 'consultation among all of the countries involved, rather than unilateralism driven by hegemonic ambitions'. China's role within this construct was that of a 'responsible' great power. Such 'responsibility', however, was largely viewed in an [instrumental](#) fashion with China acting 'responsibly to attain tangible and intangible benefits such as material gains or enhanced social status' through, for instance, 'forging greater cooperation on economic, transnational, and nontraditional security issues'.

During both Jiang and Hu's tenures, however, there were already signs that the 'built-in self-contradiction' between the retention of the Leninist state and its harnessing of capitalist economics, which the Party-state had maintained since Mao, was a source of increasing concern. As [John Garver](#) put it, the Party-state recognised that it could not 'disengage from the global economic and technological processes that generate development', but simultaneously, it was keenly aware that 'global engagement opens China to the contagion of liberal ideas'.

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For many external observers the CCP's capacity to mediate this contradiction lay in 'performance legitimacy' (that is, the delivery of continued modernisation and economic development), but under Jiang and Hu this was no longer seen as sufficient and both [sought](#) the 'adaptation and innovation of Party ideology as the main resource for re-legitimizing CCP rule'. Jiang – via his 'Three Represents' theory – sought to achieve this by [incorporating](#) 'new social strata' (that is, entrepreneurs and capitalists of all stripes) into the Party on the grounds that they contributed to the building of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

Much of Hu's tenure, in turn, was concerned with addressing societal anger at endemic [corruption](#) and [increasing](#) levels of protest and social unrest driven by widening socio-economic disparities. Hu's response was the [development](#) of a 'stability maintenance regime', built on the two ideological constructs of the 'Scientific Outlook on Development' and 'Harmonious Society'. The first [signalled](#) an attempt to 'fulfil social expectations that it [the CCP] would not let the trend of growing disparities go unheeded but would actively arrange for redistribution between the socio-economically privileged and the underprivileged' through the [implementation](#) of 'technocratic management solutions designed to fine-tune existing practices', in the name of 'good governance'. The second implicitly recognised that China's rapid economic development had [generated](#) 'social complexity, diverging social interests and ... pluralist tendencies' that the Party had to mediate.

On the eve of Xi Jinping's ascent, China's foreign and domestic policy was arguably in something of a holding pattern. In foreign policy, Jiang and Hu had managed to ride the geopolitical waves of the 1990s and 2000s relatively successfully by continuing to seek enmeshment in the existing global institutional and economic order as a means of enhancing China's national power. Domestically, as the ideological innovations undertaken by both Jiang and Hu demonstrated, the Party-state had begun to recognise that resting its legitimacy in large measure on economic performance alone was potentially a double-edged sword.

Party time: Xi re-centres the Party

From the very beginning of his time in office, Xi acted to remedy this through greater emphasis on the Leninist side of the equation. In a now famous speech to the Central Party School on 5 January 2013, the new General Secretary [asserted](#) that as 'hostile forces at home and abroad' were 'doing all in their power to smear and vilify' the 'history of the Chinese revolution' to 'confuse the hearts of the people' and 'incite them into overthrowing both the [CCP's] leadership and the socialist system', the Party must control the 'ideological battlefield' because 'the ideological road we choose to follow ... will determine victory or defeat of our Party's work, the very fate of the Party itself'.

Domestically, this has [resulted](#) in an overt return to what Timothy Cheek calls 'ideological governance through rectification', wherein 'ideological remolding, Party discipline, and managed public mobilization' have become the Party-state's 'go-to' tools to manage or resolve policy challenges. In practice, this has been manifest in the CCP's drive to [harmonise](#) Chinese society to its vision of a domestic order through technologically enabled surveillance, such as the [social credit](#) system, and [revitalisation](#) of traditional Maoist 'mass line' mobilisation. The most extreme form of this has taken place in [Xinjiang](#), where a system of pervasive surveillance [intersects](#) with the CCP's practices of ideological re-education to constitute a program of mass social re-engineering, which seeks to 'remake' Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims into pliable, controllable citizens.

In the realm of foreign policy too, Xi's tenure has produced a marked shift in how the Party-state attempts to achieve its objectives. Instead of 'biding time, hiding capabilities', Xi has pursued the 'China Dream'. This [integrates](#) a geopolitical narrative focused on the acquisition of material power (economic, technological and military) with a moral narrative, centred on 'rejuvenating' the Chinese nation, by redressing the injustices of the 'century of humiliation' suffered at the hands of foreign imperialists. While acquiring material power has long been considered the means by which China could preserve 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' in a system dominated by the US, Xi's simultaneous emphasis on the moral

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narrative of rejuvenation fundamentally challenges the current international order, by [asserting](#) the 'moral superiority of Chinese civilization' and 'the China Model as a globally important idea'.

This contains some resonance with the era of high Maoism during the 1960s, when the CCP [sought](#) to make itself – and by extension, the People's Republic of China – the moral leader of the socialist world in the face of the Soviet Union's 'revisionism' and the champion of an internationalised class war against 'imperialism'. Xi's foreign policy discourse retains some vestiges of this desire to place China 'at the centre' of international politics but all traces of Mao's internationalised class war have been jettisoned in favour of an overtly nationalist and parochial objective: the 'great national rejuvenation' of China.

Thus, what remains of the Maoist era in Xi's discourse is the centrality of the CCP itself, as the embodiment of the will of the Chinese people and the motivational force of China's rejuvenation. Xi has often [stated](#) that establishing China as a powerful and influential global power *relies* on maintaining the CCP's monopoly on political power. Xi's [report](#) to the 20th Party Congress on 15 October 2022 reaffirmed this, asserting not only that 'Our Party has dedicated itself to achieving lasting greatness for the Chinese nation' but also that the Party's 'responsibility' to attain such greatness 'is unmatched in importance'. The ultimate [objective](#) is to increase China's 'comprehensive national power, improve the lives of our people, build a socialism that is superior to capitalism, and lay the foundation for a future where we will *win the initiative and have the dominant position*'.

Pathologies of Chinese policymaking

As has been clear since 1949, China has a desire to become a powerful and influential actor in international politics. One advantage that observers have consistently believed Beijing leverages in order to 'win the initiative and have the dominant position' is its capacity for long-term, strategic planning. Here, commentators often point to such things as China's Belt and Road Initiative and its '[Made in China 2025](#)' plan to become the world's leading manufacturing and technological power as examples of Beijing's capacity to harness disparate elements of national power in pursuit of long-term objectives. There are at the least two major realities of the Chinese policy process, however, that arguably work against this assumption: 'top-level design' and the siloed nature of decision-making. Each of these affects how such plans or initiatives are generated and then translated from paper into practice.

A major dynamic of Chinese governance in the post-1978 period has been that of so-called 'top-level design': policy mandated by the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). Under 'top-level design' the PBSC issues often vague and aspirational 'policy guidance' directives that '[steers](#) [implementation](#) downward to ministries and institutions at the national and provincial levels. Although this [system](#) retains authoritarian controls via the CCP's 'powers of cadre appointment, appraisal and discipline, and discretionary government control over laws, regulations and funding', such actors 'may influence, interpret or even ignore these guidelines' to produce domestic and foreign policy outcomes through a process of contestation.

Since the beginning of the 'reform and opening' era in 1978, there have been a number of important manifestations of such 'steering' in domestic and foreign policy contexts that have resulted from 'authoritative' remarks by whomever the paramount CCP leader is. From Deng Xiaoping's 'bide time, build capabilities' guidance for foreign policy to Hu Jintao's 'harmonious world', China's diplomacy has often been [framed](#) by successive leaders' 'catchphrases and generalities that provide 'atmospheric guidance' through which subordinates then implement policy. In this [environment](#), 'officials must at least appear to be enthusiastic implementers of central directives' and 'typically rush sycophantically to embrace leaders' vague slogans, creating the misleading appearance of a tightly controlled, top-down governmental machine'.

While decision-making, in turn, has always been hierarchical within the Leninist organisational design of the CCP, some leaders – by virtue of a [combination](#) of leadership style, relative levels of authority and organisational control/power – have presided over a cycle between the extremes of ‘strongman politics’ and ‘incoherent collective leadership’. Xi’s predecessor, Hu Jintao, has generally been considered as [falling](#) into the latter category, presiding over an administration reliant on elite consensus and bargaining, which not only produced incremental policy change but also opened the space for factionalism and leverage of patronage networks at the highest levels of the CCP. Under Xi, however, this has been [reined](#) in [significantly](#).

In the realm of foreign and defence policy, in particular, Xi has placed himself at the [heart](#) of the most consequential state and Party bodies. Not only is Xi CCP General Secretary and the President of the PRC, but he also chairs the Central Military Commission, the National Security Council, and the most important ‘[Small Leading Groups](#)’ (SLG) of the CCP Central Committee related to foreign policy, such as the ‘Foreign Affairs SLG’ and ‘Taiwan Affairs SLG’. This may provide China with the capacity to make decisions more quickly and efficiently than before, but it also makes it ‘stove-piped’, as Xi is the only authoritative leader who can coordinate and act on information provided by leading foreign policy–focused state and Party bodies. Paradoxically, Xi [is](#) therefore ‘both the strong and the weak link of the Party-state’s chain of command’.

It is in *this* context that an appreciation of ideological beliefs and aspirations of the small group of authoritative actors, including the ‘core’ leader Xi Jinping himself, within the CCP becomes important. This is not because such leaders’ ideological beliefs make them inherently irrational, but rather because their ideological lens refracts their choices, closes off some policy options, and makes others more likely. The way this small group makes decisions remains [opaque](#) at best. And as we have seen in the case of Vladimir Putin’s decision-making vis a vis Ukraine, such tightly held and stove-piped decision-making can result in disastrous miscalculations.

Conclusion

A focus on the role of ideology in shaping Party-state behaviour is necessary. However, while recognising the importance of ideology in framing elite decision-makers ‘operational codes’, external observers must nonetheless also [acknowledge](#) that ‘everything we know about top leaders’ personal policy and ideological proclivities now depends on information that has passed through opaque political deliberations and has been released for purposes that we do not fully understand’. Yet if we factor in some of the considerations noted above into our analysis, some of the dynamics that we have come to categorise as defining features of Xi’s China appear less Xi-centric than currently assumed.

The ‘return’ of ideology, for instance, is often framed as primarily an instrument through which Xi has consolidated his personal power and authority within the Party via the purging and disciplining of real or potential opponents. Yet, as we noted above, the desire for a return to ideological discipline within the Party was already evident under Hu Jintao’s leadership. Indeed, there are arguably multiple motivations – from a desire to rein in perceived autonomy of local cadres, address public anger with endemic corruption, and reassert Party oversight of an increasingly complex policymaking process – that have lain behind the ‘return’ to ideological discipline. One can certainly make a case that these motivations have contributed to the consolidation of Xi’s *personal* position of power within the Party but we also should recognise that the ‘return’ of ideological discipline is also viewed as strengthening the cohesion and institutional strength of the Party itself. From this perspective Xi’s personal ambition arguably *complements* rather than detracts from that of the Party’s core objective: to maintain its monopoly on power.

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Therefore, rather than resting our assessments on the direction of Chinese domestic politics or foreign policy solely on a reading of the ideological tea leaves, it would be prudent to augment analysis of the Party-state's and/or CCP elite's ideological beliefs with greater consideration of:

- the political context in which ideological pronouncements or shifts are made
- the role of contingency in shaping domestic and foreign policy
- the effects of the major pathologies of the Party-state's decision-making and policymaking processes on policy outcomes.

Further reading

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