



China's surging authoritarian nationalism under Xi Jinping

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The announcement that Chinese President Xi Jinping was seeking to eliminate the limit on the number of terms he could serve is that latest in a series of ominous developments during his presidency. Although China has been a one-party state since the Communist revolution in 1949 that brought Mao Zedong to power, it has not had the characteristics of a true personal dictatorship since Mao's death. Indeed, over the past two decades, the individuals who have occupied the post of president have been more akin to corporate chief executive officers, with other leaders of the Party elite acting as a board of directors exercising some check on that official's power.

From the beginning of his tenure, Xi's leadership has been different in both tone and substance. Under the guise of combatting (the very real) problem of corruption, he quietly but systematically purged officials that he suspected still might be influenced by his predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, or who displayed independent, maverick tendencies. There has been a troubling hardline ideological aspect to his rule as well. Xi initiated a campaign to revitalize the Party, aiming at achieving a renewed commitment to Maoist principles. Pro-market academics also felt the chill of the new political environment, with several prominent reformers, including economist Mao Yushi, the 2012 recipient of the Cato Institute's Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty, being effectively silenced.

The consolidation of Xi's personal power, especially if it continues to exhibit neo-Maoist characteristics, not only has worrisome domestic implications, it has worrisome implications for China's external behavior. Since the onset of the country's market-oriented economic reforms in the late 1970s, Western - especially US - policy has been based on two assumptions. First, economic reforms would lead to a more open, tolerant political system, perhaps ultimately culminating in a full-fledged democracy. Not even the bloody 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown caused that assumption to waver much; proponents of the thesis regarded the episode as a setback, not a definitive defeat. Second, a less autocratic China, fully integrated into the global economy, would become, in the words of former Deputy Secretary of State and President of the World Bank Robert Zoellick, a "responsible stakeholder" in the international diplomatic and economic system.

The failure of liberalizing political trends in China to rebound after Tiananmen Square, despite the passage of nearly three decades, raises serious doubts about the first assumption. That was true even before Xi's efforts to narrow further the diversity of permissible views. Those moves,

combined with his aggrandizement of personal power, call the entire Western thesis about economic liberalization creating irresistible momentum for political liberalization into question. The United States and its allies may be facing a ruthlessly authoritarian China, having just enough economic flexibility to be a truly potent challenger.

Potentially even more alarming is the assertive, if not abrasive, foreign policy that has become increasingly apparent under Xi Jinping. That pattern has not emerged yet with respect to policy regarding North Korea. Indeed, Beijing actually has become more cooperative with US-led efforts to halt Pyongyang's ballistic missile and nuclear programs. However, it has shown up clearly in three other policy areas: the South China Sea, the East China Sea and Taiwan.

China has accelerated its land-reclamation efforts on several partially submerged reefs in the South China Sea. Some of the projects have become so extensive that Beijing has put military installations on the expanded surfaces, and in at least one case, built an airstrip. The Xi government also has exhibited complete defiance of a 2016 ruling by an international tribunal rejecting most of China's expansive territorial claims in that body of water. Finally, Beijing's warnings to the United States about US "freedom of navigation patrols" in the South China Sea have become increasingly strident.

China's growing assertiveness toward Japan regarding disputed islands in the East China Sea (called the Senkakus in Japan and Diaoyus in China) is evident as well. In July 2017, Beijing escalated bilateral tensions dramatically when it sent six nuclear-capable bombers over the islands, and responded to Tokyo's protests by telling Japanese leaders to "get used to" more flights of that nature. A few months earlier, Beijing warned the new Trump administration not to back Japan in the territorial dispute, despite established US policy to support the claim of its ally.

It is the Taiwan issue, though, where Xi's government has shown the most worrisome signs of uncompromising behavior. Over the past two years, China has intensified its efforts to lure the small number of nations that still maintain diplomatic relations with Taipei to switch ties to Beijing. That effort is paying off. In late December 2016, Sao Tome broke relations with Taipei, and in June 2017, Panama did so. Other nations in Taiwan's dwindling roster of political allies are now on Beijing's target list.

Warnings that China will use force if necessary to prevent any "separatist" initiatives by Taiwan have become more insistent, if not downright threatening. The sharp increase in the number and scope of provocative Chinese military exercises in the Taiwan Strait and other nearby waters suggests that Xi's government is not bluffing.

Those maneuvers are especially unsettling. China conducted 16 military drills in areas around Taiwan in 2017, compared to just eight in 2016 and even fewer during the years between 2008 and 2016. In July 2017, China's aircraft carrier and escort vessels ostentatiously sailed through the Taiwan Strait on their way to Hong Kong. In that same month, numerous Chinese fighter planes, bombers, and reconnaissance aircraft flew near Taiwan as part of a military exercise. That trend has continued. Chinese military aircraft engaged in maneuvers near Taiwan's northern coast in December 2017, and Beijing's naval and air power exercises culminated in January

2018, when a flotilla, again including China's aircraft carrier, traveled through the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwanese leaders are uneasy about the surge in Beijing's saber-rattling statements and menacing military moves. Officials in Taipei asserted that the burgeoning military activity posed an "enormous threat" to Taiwan's security. There are unsubtle indications coming from semi-official Chinese sources that Taiwan's current *de facto* independence cannot continue much longer. Indeed, trial balloons in the state-controlled Chinese press suggest that the deadline for meaningful progress toward reunification could be as early as 2020 or 2021. The Taiwanese government is operating on the assumption that such a looming deadline might be real.

Any one of the above domestic or foreign policy developments would be cause for concern. Taken together, they suggest that China might be reverting to a virulently authoritarian country determined to pursue an abrasive, perhaps even aggressively revisionist, foreign policy. Granted, China potentially would have much to lose economically by engaging in such behavior, and that factor might be enough to deter Xi from embarking on such a course. But the looming prospect of Xi as a true dictator instead of being merely the head of a collective leadership should cause the United States and other Western powers to reassess all of their assumptions about China's future conduct, both domestically and internationally.

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