

CPC Futures

*The New Era of
Socialism with
Chinese Characteristics*

Frank N. Pieke and
Bert Hofman, editors



18

Securitisation and Governance in the Xi Jinping Era

Joel Wuthnow

Images of protesters taking to the streets in Shanghai during the 2022 COVID lockdown underscore a contradiction in Chinese governance. On one hand, a powerful security state has been erected during the Xi era, with areas of governance such as public health securitised, i.e. regarded as national security issues subject to the coercive machinery of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese state (Heath 2015). On the other hand, protests revealed the limits of the Party's ability to control the narrative and to coordinate effective responses during a crisis. This chapter considers the nature of securitisation during the Xi era, addressing three interrelated questions: how has the concept of security expanded under Xi, how have institutional reforms influenced decision-making and implementation, and what challenges will the Party likely face in sustaining the system after the 20th Party Congress in late 2022?

An Expanding Security Concept

In April 2014, at the first meeting of the Central National Security Commission (CNSC), Xi introduced an “overall national security concept” in which 11 distinct policy areas were linked to national security (Xinhua 2014). As originally formulated, these included politics, territorial management, the military, economics, culture, social affairs, technology, information, ecology, natural resources and nuclear development. Xi encouraged cadres working in all areas to “be prepared for danger in times of peace” and cultivate a proper “attitude of distress” based on evolving challenges to the regime.

Broadening the definition of “security” beyond traditional military and defence concerns is not new. In 1994, for instance, the UN’s *Human Development Report* discussed “human security”, including economics, food, health and the environment (UNDP 1994). What makes the “overall national security concept” unique is its focus on the Communist Party.

A study guide for cadres published in April 2022 explained that the “most fundamental” security is protecting the leadership of the Party; if “political security” is not guaranteed, the country will be “torn apart and scattered like loose sand and national rejuvenation will never get off the ground” (CNSO and CPD 2022: 58). Echoing a persistent theme in party discourse, the study guide asserts that “colour revolutions” stoked by western nations are among the Party’s top threats. Its surest bet for survival, in this analysis, is exercising tight social control. Special attention is paid to the internet (the “frontline” in an “ideological struggle” with the West), enhancing party narratives in the educational system, and keeping national minorities and religious groups in check (CNSO and CPD 2022: 62–8).

The study guide explains that adverse trends in many other areas could negatively influence the Party’s security: “if we can’t effectively control [these developments] in a timely manner, they will evolve into political threats and ultimately endanger the party’s governing status” (CNSO and CPD 2022: 58). The Party has thus refined Xi’s expansive definition of security, including new topics in the “overall national security concept”.

At the Sixth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee in November 2021, the Party endorsed a revised list of 16 subfields (Xinhua 2021), with the new additions including outer space, the deep seas, polar regions, biology and overseas interests.¹ In practice, the Party also discusses other issues, including epidemic control, in the context of national security; there are now few, if any, domestic governance areas that have not become securitised.²

Xi’s focus has been on the security situation within China, but he has also explicitly stressed the interconnections between internal and external developments.³ The addition of “overseas interests” to the “overall national security concept” in 2021 suggests that party control is increasingly seen as linked to problems emerging farther afield. In April 2022, Yuan Peng, president of the Chinese Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), elaborated on Xi’s security concept, highlighting major international trends, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict and U.S.-China strategic competition. He also promoted a linkage between the “overall national security concept” and a diffuse “global security concept” (Yuan 2022). Yuan’s essay not only connected

these developments to party security but also promoted the role of actors such as the Foreign Ministry and foreign intelligence services in its defence.⁴

Institutional Design and Practice

Xi's articulation of the "overall national security concept" accompanied a set of institutional reforms designed to strengthen the party's ability to set and monitor the implementation of security policies. The key innovation was the creation of the Central National Security Commission (CNSC) at the end of 2013 (it was clarified in April 2014 that the body would be a *party* organ under Xi's leadership, rather than an institution of the state). Xi explained that the CNSC, chaired by himself, would establish a "centralised, unified, efficient, and authoritative national security system" (Xinhua 2014). Chinese analysts suggested that the Commission would help do this by coordinating policy at a high level, with its staff directed by one of Xi's key lieutenants (Li Zhanshu, replaced in 2018 by Ding Xuexiang), improving strategic planning and sharpening crisis response (Wuthnow 2017).

After the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, additional National Security Commissions began to appear at lower levels of the Party structure. Party committees down to the county level now have commissions that meet periodically to discuss major governance issues in a security context, ranging from government debt to social stability and COVID response. These meetings include attendance and briefings from representatives of relevant parts of the bureaucracy and discussions of Xi's speeches and other higher-level party guidance. The practical purpose is to unify party thinking on how to define and respond to security challenges while promoting comprehensive planning and response. Politically, with Xi at the top, there could also be no doubts about who was responsible for setting the agenda and monitoring implementation down through the party hierarchy and across the bureaucracy (Wuthnow 2021).

Placing the National Security Commissions in a pivotal position meant that the party leadership alone would define the security environment and decide the best ways to address challenges. Ultimately it would be the party's (and Xi's) diagnosis and prescriptions that mattered; no other voice would be legitimate. To some extent, the Party also strengthened and centralised its control over policy implementation. Xi took several steps to enhance the institutional position of the central party leadership, including expanding the party's anti-corruption investigation system to cover state employees and eliminating the ability of State Council and provincial officials to mobilise the People's Armed Police (Lawrence 2018; Wuthnow 2019). He also reasserted his influence as the Party's top civilian

in the Central Military Commission, having concluded that too much power had been delegated to People's Liberation Army officers under Hu Jintao (Saunders and Wuthnow 2019).

Nevertheless, implementing policy still largely fell to the *state* apparatus, from the State Council down to bureaucracies located within provincial and lower administrations. To promote efficiency, the slate of State Council ministries was reorganised in March 2018. This included the creation of a new Ministry of Emergency Management that would handle responses to natural disasters and the consolidation of border control into a new National Immigration Administration. During the pandemic, the Party also needed to rely on the civilian public health apparatus to conduct disease prevention and maintenance, and local governments (including law enforcement forces) to maintain social order.

Questions also remained about how far the CNSC's mandate would travel as the definition of security broadened to include overseas interests. Historically, key decisions about the development and employment of military capabilities were made by the Central Military Commission (CMC), which Xi also chairs (Cheung 2015). There may be a continuing division of labour in which the CNSC predominantly focuses on domestic and transnational security issues, while the CMC takes charge of military operations and crisis response farther afield. The CNSC, which also features representation from the foreign ministry and other externally focused bureaucracies, might be useful from the perspective of encouraging military-civilian coordination (discussed more fully in the chapter by Tai Ming Cheung in this volume), which Xi can compel (or at least support) from his role at the apex of the system.

Future Challenges

To protect its own security and that of the country, the Party has developed new decision-making and control mechanisms. One problem concerns institutional capacity. Despite the impressive machinery of control that the Party has at its disposal, the spread of information that conflicts with the party's messaging—including alternative views on how crises arise and should be handled—can still circulate, especially when there is a gap between policy performance and popular expectations, and individuals have still managed to organise (Qian, Mozur and Wang 2022). The Shanghai case mentioned at the start of this chapter demonstrates the limited effectiveness of party propaganda during a crisis and suggests that control of information, which the 2022 study guide treated as being of paramount importance, remained contested.

A second challenge concerns resentment against excessive securitisation of governance. In a 2022 article on the overall national security concept, Beijing University professor Jia Qingguo, who serves as a member of the standing committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, argued that a "necessary balance should be made between the pursuit of national security and other values", including "individual privacy", "individual freedom", "individual rights" and "democracy". He added that while security "is the premise and guarantee for realising other values, it cannot replace other values, let alone sacrifice other values" (Jia 2022: 23). Jia's critique—which bears some similarity to the more vocal debates in the United States following the expansion of the security state after 9/11—suggests not only pushback in China, but also that there is space even in the Xi era for such voices to be aired.

A third challenge is whether Xi's focus on security might also be creating political vulnerabilities. From the beginning, the overall national security concept and its institutional manifestations have been closely associated with Xi. A political benefit of the collective decision-making model that followed Mao was that blame could be distributed among party leaders. A more personalistic model, by contrast, means greater political risk for Xi when policies fail. Political sensitivities could have counterproductive consequences as those around Xi seek to protect him either by misattributing blame (for example, to the United States, thus accelerating mutual distrust and competition) or by failing to modify ineffective policies that he endorsed, such as the zero-COVID strategy that led to rolling lockdowns from 2020 to 2022. Accepting unparalleled authority at the 20th Party Congress might only aggravate these tendencies.

A final challenge is whether the system that Xi designed can outlast his tenure. Party leaders might be unwilling to grant as much latitude in the security arena to his successor, either to prevent strategic miscalculations on the part of a single leader or, more likely, to reduce that person's ability to monitor and control the illicit activities of the elite. This could involve a reduction in the importance of the CNSC as well as control mechanisms such as the anti-investigation agents currently based in the National Supervision Commission.⁵ Such an outcome would be most likely under a weaker successor. A less influential successor might also have greater trouble than Xi in compelling bureaucratic coordination between the historically-secretive military and civilian agencies, which could reduce the effectiveness of China's strategic planning and crisis response. At some point during or after the Party Congress, Xi could attempt to protect his legacy by announcing a successor, but would then have to assume the risk of his own influence being diluted by the presence of a leader-in-waiting.

Conclusion

The securitisation of Chinese governance reflects an underlying sense of unease within the Party about its own security in the face of mounting domestic and external challenges. The dominant solution is to prevent alternative narratives from gaining currency at home, though as the Shanghai lockdowns have demonstrated, the Party is not always fully in control. A stronger decision-making and control system has also been fashioned, helping to break down bureaucratic stovepipes and increase unity of thought among cadres, but the durability of this system after Xi leaves office is questionable. In the meantime, officials will maneuver to claim support for, and potentially broaden, the overall national security concept, attaching their own agendas and interests to the cause.⁶ By securitising all aspects of governance, the Party might have ultimately diminished its own ability to set priorities and focus on the top challenges.

This essay reflects only the views of the author and not those of the National Defense University, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.

Notes

¹ Four of the five new additions were new domains that have also been considered together in the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*. Chapter 9 of that volume addresses space, cyberspace, the deep sea, polar regions, biology and artificial intelligence. Thus, adding them to the “overall national security concept” gives greater prominence for these domains, and for the institutions (military and otherwise) responsible for them; see Xiao 2020: 142–80.

² See, for instance, “Xu Dazhe zhuchi shengwei guojia anquan weiyuanhui di’si ci huiyi” 许达哲主持省委国家安全委员会第四次会议 [Xu Dazhe Presided Over the 4th Meeting of the National Security Commission of the Provincial Party Committee], Hunan sheng renmin zhengfu 湖南省人民政府 [People’s Government of Hunan Province], 8 February 2021; available at http://www.hunan.gov.cn/hnszf/hnyw/sy/hnyw1/202102/t20210208_14430011.html (accessed 10 May 2022).

³ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 8 June 2021; available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/06.08%20Greitens%20Testimony.pdf> (accessed 2 June 2022).

⁴ Yuan’s essay also explains that CICIR itself has adopted new initiatives to promote the “overall national security concept”, including new education programmes. He himself also gained the new title of “Secretary General of the Center for the Study of the Overall National Security Concept”.

⁵ The National Supervision Commission, created in March 2018, is responsible for combatting corruption and investigates party members and state employees who are not members of the Party. Its authorities include the ability to detain suspects for up to six

months without the right to consult a lawyer and other extralegal provisions. For details, see Horsley 2018.

⁶ A parallel can be drawn here to the equally nebulous Belt and Road Initiative.

References

- Cheung Tai Ming. 2015. “The Riddle in the Middle: China’s Central Military Commission in the Twenty-first Century”, in *PLA Influence on China’s National Security Policymaking*, ed. Andrew Scobell and Phillip C. Saunders, pp. 84–119. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- CNSO [Central National Security Office] and CPD [Central Propaganda Department]. 2022. 总体国家安全观学习纲要. [Overall national security concept study outline]. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe 人民出版社 [People’s Press].
- Heath, Timothy R. 2015. “The ‘Holistic Security Concept’: The Securitization of Policy and the Increasing Risk of Militarized Crisis”, *China Brief*, 27 Jun. Available at <https://www.rand.org/blog/2015/06/the-holistic-security-concept-the-securitization.html> (accessed 26 July 2022).
- Horsley, Jamie P. 2018. What’s So Controversial About China’s New Anti-Corruption Body?” *Brookings*, 30 May. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/whats-so-controversial-about-chinas-new-anti-corruption-body/> (accessed 10 May 2022).
- Jia Qingguo 贾庆国. 2022. “Dui guojia anquan tedian yu zhili yuanze de sikao” 对国家安全特点与治理原则的思 [Reflections on the special characteristics and governing principles of national security]. *Guojia anquan yanjiu* 国家安全研究 [Research on national security], 2022, 1: 23.
- Lawrence, Susan. 2018. *China’s Communist Party Absorbs More of the State*. CRS Report No. IF10854. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service. Available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10854/2> (accessed 8 August 2022).
- Qian, Isabelle, Paul Mozur and Vivian Wang. 2022. “China’s Covid Lockdown Tests Limits of Triumphant Propaganda”, *New York Times*, 27 Apr. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/27/world/asia/china-covid-propaganda.html> (accessed 8 August 2022).
- Saunders, Phillip C. and Joel Wuthnow. 2019. “Large and in Charge: Civil-Military Relations under Xi Jinping”, in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al., pp. 519–55. Washington, DC: NDU Press.
- UNDP (United Nations Development Program). 1994. *Human Development Report 1994*. New York: UNDP.

- Wuthnow, Joel. 2017. "China's New 'Black Box': Problems and Prospects for the Central National Security Commission", *China Quarterly* 232: 886–903. doi:10.1017/S0305741017001308.
- _____. 2019. *China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press. Available at <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/82/China%20SP%2014%20Final%20for%20Web.pdf> (accessed 26 July 2022).
- _____. 2021. "A New Chinese National Security Bureaucracy Emerges", *China Brief*, 23 Nov. 2021. Available at <https://jamestown.org/program/early-warning-brief-a-new-chinese-national-security-bureaucracy-emerges/> (accessed 26 July 2022).
- Xiao Tianliang 肖天亮. 2020. *Zhanlüexue* 战略学 [Science of military strategy]. Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe 国防大学出版社 [National Defence Press].
- Xinhua 新华. 2014. "Jianchi zongti guojia anquanguan zou Zhongguo tese guojia anquan daolu" 坚持总体国家安全观 走中国特色国家安全道路 [Maintain the overall national security concept, travel the road of national security with Chinese characteristics, 15 Apr. http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2014-04/15/c_1110253910.htm. Note: "Overall national security concept" is sometimes translated as "holistic security concept".
- _____. 2021. "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu dang de bainian fendou zhongda chengjiu he lishi jingyan de jueyi" 中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议(全文) [Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on the major achievements and historical experiences of the party's century-long struggle, full text], 11 Nov. Available at http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/16/content_5651269.htm (accessed 8 August 2022).
- Yuan Peng 袁鹏. 2022. "Xin shidai weihe he suzao guojia anquan de genben zunxun—xuexi "zongti anquanguan xuexi gangyao" 新时代维护和塑造国家安全的根本遵循—学习《总体国家安全观学习纲要》 [The fundamental principles for maintaining and shaping national security in the new era—studying the study outline for the overall national security concept], 26 Apr. Available at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-04/26/nw.D110000renmrb_20220426_2-11.htm (accessed 8 August 2022).