

Xi Jinping 习近平

Born 1953



Current Positions

- General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (2012–present)
- President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (2013–present)
- Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) (2012–present)
- Chairman of the National Security Committee (2013–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms (2013–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Foreign Affairs and National Security (2013–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs (2012–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Financial and Economic Work (2013–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Network Security and Information Technology (2014–present)
- Head of the CMC Central Leading Group for Deepening Reforms of National Defense and the Military (2014–present)
- Commander in Chief of the Joint Operations Command Center of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) (2016–present)
- Chairman of the Central Military and Civilian Integration Development Committee (2017–present)
- Member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) (2007–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (2002–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Xi Jinping was born on June 15, 1953, in Beijing. His ancestral home is Fuping County, Shaanxi Province. Xi was a “sent-down youth” at an agricultural commune in Yanchuan County, Shaanxi (1969–75).¹ He joined the CCP in 1974. He received his undergraduate education in chemical engineering from Tsinghua University in Beijing (1975–79) and later graduated with a doctoral degree in law (Marxism) from the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tsinghua University (via part-time studies, 1998–2002).

Early in his career (1979–82) he served as a personal secretary (*mishu*) to Geng Biao, then minister of defense. Subsequently, Xi served as deputy secretary and then secretary of Zhengding County, Hebei Province (1982–85), and thereafter in Fujian Province as executive vice-mayor of Xiamen City (1985–88), party secretary of Ningde County (1988–90), party secretary of Fuzhou City (1990–96), deputy party secretary of Fujian Province (1996–99), governor of Fujian Province (1999–2002), governor of Zhejiang Province (2002), and party secretary of Zhejiang Province (2002–07). In March 2007, Xi was appointed party secretary of Shanghai. Seven months later, he was transferred to Beijing to serve as a Politburo Standing Committee member (2007–present) and executive secretary of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee (2007–12). In March 2008, he was elected PRC vice-president (2008–13). Xi was in charge of preparations for both the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and the celebrations commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2009. He also served as president of the Central Party School (2007–12), the most important venue for training officials and ideological/policy research in the CCP. He was first elected to the Central Committee as an alternate member at the 15th Party Congress in 1997.

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Xi is a princeling, the son of Xi Zhongxun, a former Politburo member and vice-premier who was one of the architects of China's Special Economic Zones in the early 1980s.ⁱⁱ Xi Jinping is widely considered to be a protégé of both former PRC president Jiang Zemin and former PRC vice-president Zeng Qinghong. Xi's first marriage produced no children. His ex-wife, Ke Lingling, is the daughter of Ke Hua, former PRC ambassador to the United Kingdom, where Ke Lingling now lives. Xi's current wife, from his second marriage, is Peng Liyuan, a famous Chinese folksinger who, until recently, served in the PLA at the rank of major general. Their only daughter, Xi Mingze, received her undergraduate degree in psychology from Harvard University (2010–14) and is now a graduate student in the same field at a university in China.

Political Prospects and Policy Preferences

Xi will surely be reelected as general secretary of the CCP and chairman of the CMC at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, and then as president of the PRC at the 13th National People's Congress in March 2018. He will likely retain most or all of his current leadership positions during his second five-year term as China's top leader. In the course of his first term, Xi has proven himself to be China's strongest leader since Deng Xiaoping. Of the many noteworthy developments from this period, the following three efforts stand out:

Anti-Graft Campaign – With the support of his principal political ally in the PSC, “anticorruption czar” Wang Qishan, Xi launched a remarkably bold national anti-graft campaign that resulted in the purges of not only retired heavyweight leaders such as former PSC member Zhou Yongkang, but also about 10 percent of the members of the 18th Central Committee, including Politburo member Sun Zhengcai. To a certain extent, the overriding objective of his anti-corruption campaign has been to restore faith in a ruling party that had lost the trust of the Chinese public in the wake of notorious cases like the Bo Xilai scandal and the Ling Jihua incident.ⁱⁱⁱ

Military Reform – Xi achieved a milestone victory in restructuring the PLA, officially referred to as “military reform” (军队改革). His efforts have centered on marginalizing the four PLA general departments that had undermined the authority of the civilian-led CMC; transforming China's military operations from a Russian-style, army-centric system toward what analysts call a “Western-style joint command”; and swiftly promoting “young guards” to top positions in the officer corps.

Proactive Foreign Policy – Xi's “proactive” approach to foreign policy (奋发有为) marks a significant departure from Deng Xiaoping's strategy of “keeping a low profile” (韬光养晦). His efforts have sought to showcase China's rapid rise on the world stage under his leadership, including through the launch of the “Belt and Road Initiative” and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), concerted attempts to seek a “new model of great power relations” with the United States, and China's deepening engagement in international institutions and venues, such as the Davos World Economic Forum.

On other policy issues, however, Xi has exhibited paradoxical preferences and tendencies. For example, the objective of his economic policy, as articulated at the third plenum of the 18th Central Committee in 2013, has been to make the private sector the decisive driver of the Chinese economy. Yet, Xi continues to favor China's industrial policy and has called for making flagship state-owned enterprises “bigger and stronger.”

His attitude toward public intellectuals has proven similarly ambivalent. Whereas Xi has promoted Chinese think tanks, which are mostly staffed with academics, his politically conservative approach to governance—particularly his reliance on ideological oversight and media censorship—has left him at loggerheads with many of the country's intellectuals. Likewise, the fourth plenum of the 18th Party Central Committee, which was held in the fall of 2014, was devoted to China's legal reform. This was

the first time in CCP history that a plenum concentrated on law, and it seems that Xi, more than any previous top leader, is interested in having his legacy center on the development of rule of law and the judiciary in China. But critics often point to the arrests and harassment of human rights lawyers in China as examples that the rule of law in China has actually regressed—not advanced—under Xi’s leadership.

Some of this cognitive dissonance may be temporary compromise as Xi positions himself to gain broad support from various forces in the country. If Xi aspires to be a truly great and transformative Chinese leader, sooner or later he must present a clear and coherent vision for the country while also respecting the political rules and norms that have laid the groundwork for China’s economic and political rise. The outcomes of the 19th Party Congress, particularly the new leadership lineup and revised ideological and policy agendas, will reveal how Xi plans to draw upon the political capital he accumulated during his first term and will offer important clues on whether he intends to promote or undermine political institutionalization.

Compiled by Cheng Li and the staff of the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings

Notes:

ⁱ “Sent-down youth” (插队知青) refers to young, educated urbanites who left their home cities to serve as manual laborers in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

ⁱⁱ For more information on Xi’s family background and his early life experiences, see Liang Jian 梁剑, *New Biography of Xi Jinping* [习近平新传] (New York: Mirror Books, 2012), and Wu Ming 吴鸣, *Biography of Xi Jinping* [习近平传] (Hong Kong: 文化艺术出版社, 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ For a detailed discussion of these cases, see Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2016), pp. 1–5, 23–24.