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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST  
Chinese domestic politics in the rise of global China  
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FORD: Hi, I'm Lindsey Ford and you're listening to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm a David Rubenstein fellow in the Foreign Policy program and this is day three of our five day Global China takeover of the Cafeteria podcast. I'm talking to different Brookings scholars each day this week about a new series of papers for our Global China project that explore various aspects of China's global power and influence.

Today's episode is a little different from our other discussions this week because I'm going to be talking with Cheng Li about Chinese domestic politics and more specifically about what we should understand about Xi Jinping as a political leader.

Cheng is the director of the China Center here at Brookings. We're going to talk elite politics, Xi's effort to remake the CCP, and the political strategies he has employed to centralize power in China.

Cheng, we've been talking about China's global influence this week, but I'm glad we're having today's conversation, because I think an important element of analyzing the policies that we're looking at from the outside is to take a look at the leaders behind them.

You've written a lot about elite politics in China. The paper that you've written for this series talks about the contradictions of today's China. Certainly for outside observers and experts the past few years have put some of these contradictions on stark display. You talk in your paper about how we should understand Xi Jinping and his influence on Chinese policymaking, which is an important topic to address because it's been a hot one of late. I think because of Xi's own centralization of power and influence is something that we've seen so clearly in the past few years, but also as a lens people have used to explain some of the changes we have seen taking place in China. And also as we've seen China growing more politically, more economically, more powerful on the one hand, we also see that under Xi there has been a crackdown on domestic dissent and freedom of speech, pressure on human rights, domestic NGOs, and of course mass imprisonments we've seen in Xinjiang.

So, Cheng, I want to start off talking about the title of your piece, which is “Xi Jinping’s ‘progress.’” Can you talk to us about this idea of “progress,” explain it, where’d you get this idea from, and why do you think this is an important concept to understand when we’re talking about Chinese policymaking under Xi.

LI: Sure. “Progress,” combining progress and regress, was a word coined by the American poet E. E. Cummings almost a century ago. I came across this word as it was used as a semantic title of the 2018 Shanghai Biennale, a reputable international contemporary art exhibition in Shanghai. Interestingly the Chinese semantic title of the Biennale also really used the Chinese term called “yubu,” which is the mystical Daoist ritual dance steps of ancient China in which the dancer appears to be moving forward while simultaneously going backwards, or vice versa.

Now while this symbolism can apply to various paradoxical phenomena, and perhaps the global context in general, it is particularly valuable in assessing Chinese President Xi Jinping consolidation of power on the one hand and now his domestic and socio-economic policies on the other.

Now, both the English word “progress” and the Chinese term “yubu” not only point out the contrasting assessments due to different perspectives, but also reveals the imperative on the part of Xi Jinping to maintain a fragile balance through a number of important policy moves.

Now, for example, domestically he portrayed himself as the inheritor of the legacy of both Mao and then Hu who represented the two different styles of leadership and associated economic policy policies. Internationally he offers contradictory clues regarding whether China seeks to be a revisionist power or to preserve the status quo in the post-Cold War global order.

Now, these kind of things are constantly or frequently appear with Xi Jinping’s policy over a few years. Now he is very conservative in terms of media control, crackdown on intellectual freedom, and also like the term limits, abolishing the president's term limits. He's really alienated the country's intellectuals. but at the same time he reached out to the public with the anti-

corruption, military reform, and also some of the economic policy could be market-orientated, at the same time also continue to promote the state-owned enterprises. You see numerous contradictions, that he tried to position himself with different interest groups and also the country become increasingly more dynamic at a society level. So this is the way he handles his domestic policies. Politics, economics was conservative politically, but also some of the adjustment in economic policy.

The same things with international policies. That he probably were better perceived in South America, in Africa, but certainly caused a lot of concern with this authoritarian outreach in Europe, in China's neighboring country, and also in North America.

FORD: Yeah, so I thought that this idea of contradictions in Chinese policy and looking at that through the lens of some of the contradictions in Xi's own life and his own approach and how he sort of has cast himself in these very different lights, was really interesting. And you start off talking about that a part of this some of these contrasts in understanding Xi Jinping actually has to do with his own childhood and the way that he grew up. And what I thought was so interesting here is you say Xi was both a princeling and a peasant. Right? And that both of these sorts of very different formative experiences that he had you can see playing out in his policymaking. So talk to me a little about how XI has used both of these identities to his own political advantage in different ways.

LI: Absolutely. As we know Xi Jinping was a born red, or the princeling. He was a prince and the son of a veteran revolutionary leader during the communist takeover in China. In 1953, the year Xi Jinping was born, his father was actually Secretary General, or the chief of staff of the State Council which was responsible \_\_\_\_ assisting Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai in running the government. Xi Jinping spent most of his early childhood years in \_\_\_\_ High[school], which is the headquarters, the compound reserved for the most powerful officials in the country, where the families of the leaders were waited on by chefs, nurses, drivers, and bodyguards. It's a very

privileged family. But when Xi Jinping was 9 years old his father fell out of favor with Chairman Mao and was purged from the Chinese Communist Party. Political circumstances actually became even worse for Xi Jinping's family when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966.

A few years later in 1969 at the age of 16, Xi Jinping was dispatched along with countless other teenagers, to Yan'an, a very poor region the Chinese call The Yellow Earth, where he and his fellow teenagers live in cave, slept on brick pads, and toiled as farmers, as peasants. Xi Jinping spent over six years, his formative years, in this very difficult physical environment, which gave him the unusual opportunity to develop an understanding of a socio-economically disadvantaged area of the country.

Now this kind of new identity as both princeling and peasant now serve as a political asset for Xi Jinping as he becomes the top leader, enabling him to switch between one and other when it benefits him to do so. That reflects his contradictions you just described and also this kind of "progress" that I described early on.

So he constantly tried to position himself in the best advantaged position domestically and internationally, so sometimes that they cause some confusion or ambiguities. So was the way he handled the political situation in China.

FORD: And what you talk about is that you know when Xi is positioning himself to move into power, this identity as what folks refer to as a "princeling" in China, which basically means you are you're a part of the elite class, right, that this is how he positions himself over some of perhaps Hu Jintao's factions. But then when he gets in to a leadership position what you see is a pivot toward perhaps a more populist positioning of himself. And actually I thought it was so interesting because the thing that was popping into my mind as I'm reading your paper is I was like, huh, someone who's grown up in this elite coastal background, and yet for political purposes has positioned himself as a populist leader of the people in rural areas and things. Some really interesting similarities perhaps in the political backgrounds and sensibilities of how President

Trump has leveraged his political identity and Xi Jinping that I had never actually thought about before.

So you talk a bit about Xi perhaps becoming more populist and some of the efforts he's made to sort of rebrand himself as a leader of the people, per se. I think this is interesting and what I want you to explain to people, I think people get why populism is appealing as a political strategy perhaps here in the United States, maybe even in places like the UK, because in democratic systems you need to play to certain political constituencies. But why is that a good political strategy in China?

LI: Well, when he came to power the Communist Party was in big trouble. The corruption was out of control. And the political infighting, especially as we look at that period in 2012, Bo Xilai, another princeling, started his campaign for top leadership. So eventually he failed largely because of the scandal and the murder case involved with his wife, and Neil Heywood the British businessman. So the Communist Party was in big trouble in terms of legitimacy and the rampant corruption. Now Xi Jinping took this opportunity to put anti-corruption as his top priority. His previous background as a peasant in inland China, in the poor region, certainly gave him the opportunity and the background to say the words that the people could understand. So that positioned himself well. So he shifted from the princeling background to the leader of the people not only because of the party's policy of anti-corruption but also because of economic policy.

Now he really accelerated the poverty reduction. Actually he used a term, "poverty elimination." He gave the promise that by 2020, next year, China will completely eliminate \_\_\_\_\_ poverty, meaning based on the World Bank or U.N. definition, like below two dollars a day.

Now certainly Xi Jinping was not the leader who started that, Deng Xiaoping, \_\_\_\_\_, Hu Jintao who carried out the poverty reduction. But Xi Jinping used the term, the position, poverty elimination, to really implement with much government input. That if we look at the charts in my

paper you can see the rapid rise of the budget spent on poverty. So he was really determined to complete that. He was fortunate enough to be the person to deliver.

Now as Bill Gates recently said, that over the past 40 years a total of 800 million people in China got out of poverty. So Xi Jinping's \_\_\_ was the last 40 million people. So if we can succeed at that this leaves a great legacy for the Chinese Communist Party and for his leadership. So he's fortunate enough to deliver that. So that makes him really popular.

He frequently visit poor regions, more than any other leader, any of his predecessors. So that actually, it's not just lip service, not just the political position, but also with a certain degree of delivery. So that certainly gave him tremendous support from ordinary people despite the fact that some of his policies like political control, media control, and personality cult, alienates the country's intellectuals and to a certain extent they also alienate some leaders. But he is very popular in the vast region of the, the particularly poor region in the country, and that gave him tremendous capital which he can spend.

FORD: And you talk about right off the bat this anti-corruption campaign which has been really sweeping, and as you say a piece of this was aimed at perhaps trying to shore up the legitimacy of the Communist Party. But perhaps the political upside there if you will is that Xi also manages to essentially remove a lot of other elite leaders who perhaps wouldn't have been fully behind him and put in place a lot of his own supporters, which in the long run you can definitely see the political calculations there.

So how much has what's happened as part of the anti-corruption campaign had a big impact on his longevity and his potential longevity as a political leader enabling him to do some of the things that we've seen more recently, and maybe staying in power longer than perhaps originally anticipated?

LI: This is excellent question actually. When you look at anti-corruption, certainly this is the largest one in the Communist Party's history. Actually in two years the party will celebrate its

100th anniversary just like in next few days the country will celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. So the campaign against corruption under Xi Jinping's watch, certainly the largest one in the [past] couple, four years that he purged 440 senior leaders, which means that the vice minister and vice cabinet rank or above and also including 78 military generals—major generals, lieutenant generals, and four star generals—has never happened before in PRC history.

Now of course this anticorruption is selective, it's not just purely based on legal procedure. But on the other hand it's also in a way to save the Chinese Communist Party. Now we maybe we put too much emphasis on his consolidation of power which is certainly the case, but also in a way that saved the Chinese Communist Party. This probably is also shared by some other leaders, if this kind of corruption rampant of the Communist Party continue the party will be gone. So in that regard he got tremendous support from the political establishment with certain kind of reservation as well. So it's a very delicate balance.

Now, certainly, you're absolutely right, that he put a lot of his proteges into power. Now let me also mention the background, very very interesting. When he came to power in his first term princelings actually dominated China's leadership. Xi Jinping was one of them because he needed the princeling support to deal with his political opposition. The rivalry [with] the Hu Jintao usually come from the humble background, from Chinese Communist Youth League. So he used princelings to fight against the so-called Youth League factions. But when Youth League factions diminished he actually now started to remove some of the princelings out of power particularly in the military. Now he just wants to promote his own proteges, most of them are not necessarily princelings, and into important positions particularly his associates in Fujian, \_\_\_\_\_, and Shanghai. And also his schoolmates at Tsinghua University, etcetera.

So these people are well positioned especially in the most important cities. Three or four years ago none of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, or Guangdong or Shenzhen and Guangzhou were led by his proteges, but now almost all, or at least the 95 percent, are led by his proteges. So this is the way



he consolidated power. You can see his adaptability. You can see his manipulation of the political system. So in his advantage and to a certain extent he certainly consolidates power but also from the Chinese Communist Party's perspective saves the party.

FORD: So what we might have understood in the past is sort of these traditional competing factions of the CCP, between the Youth League and the princelings. You're essentially saying, "that's done. It's Xi Jinping's CCP now." Is that fair?

LI: I probably would not go that far. Certainly the previous relatively balanced faction, which I used to call one party two factions, now are not the case because Xi Jinping dominated power. But at the same time the competing factions still have some seats in important positions. Look at the Premier Li Keqiang. Look at the youngest, the vice premier Hu Chunhua. Look at Wang Yang. He is currently ranked number four. These are all from the Chinese Communist Youth League. So their representation is significantly reduced, they no longer can balance Xi Jinping's power. But they are still there. I think that Xi Jinping now become the majority [power] in the Politburo, overwhelming majority. But at the same time I think that he cannot complete the dominant leadership. So to a certain extent he needs to be a little bit cautious to still let some of the other leaders from different backgrounds to be presented. Although there's no question that he is the boss and no one at the moment will challenge him. But on the other hand, you cannot completely eliminate factions. This is always will be with any political system. But at the moment it's not balanced like what happened post-Deng era, especially in Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras. Usually they share seats but now Xi Jinping certainly has the upper hand especially in the Politburo, his proteges occupy almost 80 percent.

FORD: So, one thing that you saw in the press here in the United States, especially over the summer, was a lot of speculation that there's unhappiness in [ ] High right now and that perhaps Xi has overstepped and that some of the other political elites are frustrated with how U.S.-China relations have taken this downward spiral and that he is under pressure because people are happy

with the harder line that he's taken. What what's your take? Is that fair assessment? No? How did how do you read the tea leaves?

LI: I think there's a genuine concern, a reservation, about the abolishment of term limits. Because if you leave the political succession, which is very, very important and which actually more or less [was] institutionalized under Deng Xiaoping, now it becomes out of the window. So there is some concern within the political establishment. So it's fair to say that the concern is or was widely shared. But probably the [rumor], talk about the letters or joint pressure, maybe little bit exaggerated or overstated, etcetera.

But I think that the top leadership will give Xi Jinping the benefit to gradually deal with some new challenges and eventually institute some of the institutional mechanism.

But the one thing that certainly helps him is that the way that the U.S. considers China as a rivalry or as some would even say the enemy. The trade war, and the decoupling, and \_\_\_ just treats China as the enemy and the issues that the Chinese talk about, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong, Taiwan, etcetera.

Now play \_\_\_ in Xi Jinping's favor to make him look like the leader, to represent China's interests to be tough under foreign pressure. So that plays a role. So previously probably there would be more cynicism from [the] country's middle class about Xi Jinping, the way he governs, etcetera. But now nationalism certainly prevails. So that's Xi Jinping certainly take advantage of that development.

So he recently gave an important speech at the Central Party School just two weeks ago and used a term, "douzheng," which could translate to either competition or struggle or fighting, fighting against the United States. Fifty-six times used in that speech. That tells you that some of the policy shift. But just also two years ago he said, also publicly, that there's one \_\_\_ reason that the United States and China should be partners, should be friends.

So you can see his policy adaptation, which is also quite remarkable.

But my point is, this is a leader, on the one hand, is quite rigid but at the same time is also quite flexible. It depends on what the issue is. So by and large he is a pragmatist and not like someone said he is a completely rigid leader. So that's one ....

Secondly he actually not purely just based on his claim to consolidate his power, he worked along with the system, for example the poverty elimination, is in line with the party's agenda, so as to carry out more forcefully. So it's on behalf of the country's need or the party's need. So that also we should not miss that \_\_\_ argument or Chinese perception.

FORD: So you talk about this, the much more frequent use of the term "competition," which is certainly being used much more frequently here in the United States as well. And you mentioned at the beginning China as a revisionist power, as a status quo power. I think if you talked to many American analysts right now they would say, no this this debate is settled. China is absolutely a revisionist power. We can look at Chinese speeches. You can see it. They're clearly dissatisfied with the status quo. Hence that's why we have to have this strategic competition lens for the U.S.-China relationship. Tell me where you see still a contradiction between China exhibiting status quo tendencies and revisionist tendencies. And do you think that this turn towards much more competition in Xi's rhetoric suggests that Chinese leadership at least intends to just much more openly embrace the concept of strategic competition going forward?

LI: This raises the question whether \_\_\_ Xi Jinping's perceived as aggressive acts are predetermined or to a certain extent he reacts to an ever-changing international environment. So my answer is it's probably more reactive rather than active. You can see that, as you just mentioned, that his use of competition or fighting to a certain extent reacts to what we talk about in this country and talk about new era to deal with China. Certainly we use more often competition rather than cooperation. Someone even we should not talk about cooperation. We should not talk about the term engagement. So the overall message in the United States is disengagement or decoupling. So under that condition quite naturally Xi Jinping may use some

different language which is a departure with what he said early on, that there's one solid reason that the U.S. and China should work together.

So my view is that he needs to react to the international environment for his advantage. Of course he now oversees the country, it's under historical \_\_\_\_\_ that China becomes the second largest economy and of course that comes with China's ambition to be a major leader in world affairs. But whether this is a complete departure from China's previous leaders. Now of course if Deng Xiaoping was still alive, whether he will also pursue the One Belt, One Road Initiative or not, this is also debatable because now China increasingly depends on foreign markets, foreign resources. And also China becomes so rich they also need to invest overseas. So that's a question, whether One Belt, One Road is completely Xi Jinping's initiative or if it's a natural growth of China's development. So in that regard whether it's individual behavior or a country's behavior.

Now, of course the international community should have every reason to be suspicious. But at the same time we probably should not overstate the case or should misunderstand. But I think the bottom line is we do need to understand, he got some tremendous support from the public to a certain extent, and also from the party establishment. But at the same time the country is also increasing \_\_\_\_\_ intellectual criticism is also on the rise about the personality cult, culture \_\_\_\_\_ style, media censorship. These are all true, but at the same time that the intellectuals [are] also concerned about foreign pressure. Nationalism is also on the rise. At the end of [the] day if China engages with conflict with the United States, we can ask whether the whole country, the Chinese people, will support Xi Jinping or will challenge him. Now this is very important phenomenon. My view is the nation at a time of when nationalism is on the rise, Xi Jinping may feel may in reality also backed by the Chinese public even including some of the intellectuals.

FORD: Cheng, thanks so much for taking the time to discuss your paper with us and sit down with me today. I hope people will go read your paper and all of the really interesting papers that scholars have produced for this project that are up on the Brookings website. With that, this has

been another episode of the Brookings Cafeteria. I hope everyone will join me tomorrow for day four of our special Global China series. We will be talking with Caitlin Talmadge and Mike O'Hanlon about deterrence. So join me then.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer Gaston Reboledo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our intern this summer is Eowyn Fain. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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