

Opinion **Chinese politics & policy**

Rumours that Xi Jinping is losing his grip on power are greatly exaggerated

Evidence is thin that past episodes of factional strife in China's communist party are repeating themselves

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON



Xi Jinping greets party officials at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing last month © Xie Huanchi/Xinhua News Agency/eyevine

Christopher Johnson 9 HOURS AGO

The writer is CEO of China Strategies Group and a former top China analyst at the CIA

As China enters its version of the political silly season, the commentariat says President Xi Jinping is in trouble. “Elites”, “reformers” and “angry entrepreneurs” despise his policies and megalomania, and they want to weaken or expel him when his term ends this autumn. [Factional rivals](#) also are constraining Xi, and leadership infighting explains [policy outcomes](#) or their absence. Even his premier, Li Keqiang, supposedly is [overcoming](#) a decade in political purgatory to [subtly court nervous foreign businesses](#) and right Xi’s mistakes in maintaining zero-Covid and cracking down on entrepreneurs and the property sector.

But this proposition is unconvincing because it ignores how Xi has bent China’s one-party system to his advantage. Factional models work when contending camps of roughly equal power exist. Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues in the 1980s, or the messy handover between former presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, come to mind. In Xi’s case, the evidence is sparse that other Chinese Communist party magnates are overturning — or even meaningfully questioning — his decisions. That is because Xi always had a plan.

From 2012, he started framing party history into three eras — Mao Zedong’s, Deng’s and Xi’s “New Era” — which he [canonised](#) in 2017 by enshrining his personal

and his "three eras" which he [announced](#) in 2017 by enshrining his personal ideological "thought" in the party constitution. New catchphrases in a party [resolution on history](#) last year emphasised the incontestability of his supremacy. A final upgrade this year truncating his clunky 12-word ideological concept to "Xi Jinping Thought" and [granting him other unique accolades](#) would make Mao his only match.

Xi's pursuit of ideological exaltation is about more than theoretical laureates, however. It sets him above potential rivals by making his words and deeds the party's "line". Criticising them is then an attack on the party, a risk few cadres will take. This principle was on vivid display last month when the party's top policy body resoundingly endorsed zero-Covid despite obvious unease over the mess in Shanghai.

Apotheosising Xi's "three eras" airbrushed Jiang and Hu from party history, making them political artefacts. Last year's resolution went further, letting Xi describe his "thought" [as akin to Mao's](#) while [downgrading Deng's](#). In short, ideology still matters in Leninist China, and Xi harnesses it to make himself unassailable.

Factional explanations depict Xi as a unidimensional statist and ideologue who wants to reprise Mao's Cultural Revolution. Constraints by rivals must therefore explain regime policies that do not match the caricature. So, when Li preaches relief for industries previously in the government's crosshairs, he is challenging Xi, not playing the loyal tactical commander of a cratering economy that Occam's razor would suggest.

Of course, Xi's stifling of debate and China's sealed borders make authoritative insights scarce. But claims that Xi and his detractors are locked in a struggle like [that](#) dividing Mao from Liu Shaoqi and Deng in the 1960s lack credibility. During real crises, like the run-up to the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, typically monolithic state media aired contending viewpoints, telegraphing leadership strife. They even briefly removed Jiang from an official photo just before he surrendered his last title in 2004. There are no such indicators now.

Jiang's career offers a final warning against counting Xi out early. Jiang's opponents hoped disclosing "secret files" would retire him, but they instead showed the losing side often arranges dubious leaks to foreigners when party infighting runs high. Their campaign started with *The Tiananmen Papers*, allegedly secret documents that portrayed Jiang's appointment as general secretary as [unconstitutional](#). Then came *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files*, which cited "confidential reports" from the party's personnel office to [preview a new top line-up](#) without Jiang that was wrong in almost every detail.

Jiang retained influence for a decade more, but found in the end that he could not rule by fiat from behind the scenes. Xi is determined to avoid that mistake by using his ideological coronation, anti-corruption campaigns targeted at enemies and demolition of party procedures to stay in office, maybe for life.

Xi's grip is firm and he is enacting a transformative agenda, even if not to the west's liking. Governments must deal directly with him and his policies to mount effective responses. The Biden administration says Xi's [techno-authoritarianism](#), [military muscle-flexing](#) and [efforts to subvert the rules-based international order](#) require immediate attention. But that urgency is betrayed by a lopsided policy that refuses direct contact with Xi's China, suggesting it hopes he would just go away.

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