

FOCUS



Illustration: Henry Wong

# Xi's power play

**President's ongoing quest** to consolidate his grip may be sign of the scale of resistance he is facing

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A subtle but significant change seems to be underway in Chinese politics – one that involves President Xi Jinping (習近平) further cementing his position as a strong-man leader.

He broke with precedent in diplomatic protocol last year when he sent his chief of staff, Li Zhanshu (栗戰書), to Moscow – rather than another diplomat – for talks with the Kremlin, including a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Last month, another of his aides, Liu He, chatted by phone to US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew about China's exchange rate policies – a duty usually carried out by Vice-Premier Wang Yang (王滄).

Wang is more senior than Liu in the ruling Communist Party's hierarchy, and, as Lew's counterpart, has represented the mainland in the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue over the past three years.

The unusual move to grant enhanced powers to both Li and Liu suggests an important change in China's dynastic-style of elite politics; the long-standing collective, consensus-driven form of leadership that has existed since the era of Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) (from 1978 until the late 1990s) is now giving way to a centralised system dominated by a strong-man leader – Xi himself.

In recent weeks, the party's propaganda machine has geared itself up to promote such a change, with a push to designate Xi as being at the "core of the party's leadership", and a nationwide campaign calling for all officials to declare their "absolute loyalty" to his presidential position.

Analysts believe the campaign plans to strengthen Xi's hand over the next 12 months – a time of political manoeuvring before the

semi-leadership transition at next year's 19th Party Congress when a large number of top officials are expected to retire.

"The latest campaign aims to strengthen Xi's power by boosting his absolute status within the leadership," said Zhang Ming, a professor of political science at Beijing's Renmin University.

Zhang said since the rule of late chairman Mao Zedong (毛澤東), never had the centralisation of power reached the level now seen under Xi's stewardship, with the president and party chief having acquired all the control that was possible.

Analysts expect Xi to make the

**The unrelenting push by Xi reveals ... the strength of resistance**

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reshuffle of party officials his priority in the next 12 months because the next congress will see five of the seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) – everyone except the president and Premier Li Keqiang (李克強) – retire due to age.

Another six members in the 25-strong Politburo, the party's second most powerful body, will also step down by then as they will all have passed the compulsory retirement age of 68 in 2017.

The remaining 12 Politburo members, apart from Xi and Premier Li, will vie for five vacant seats on the PSC, the party's innermost cabinet. About 250 Central Committee members will compete for 11 Politburo seats.

Xi recently issued a rallying cry

for his party colleagues in both the Politburo and the PSC to unite behind him in "thought and action".

He told a Politburo meeting on December 29 and 30: "Politburo members should stay in line with the Central Committee and stick to the correct political direction and remain loyal to the party."

At a meeting of the PSC on January 8, Xi told party leaders they should remain politically aware and safeguard the central authority of the party. Reporting on the meeting, Xinhua news agency quoted Mao to emphasise the point. "Within the party, the government, the army, the people, academics, and east, west, south, north, centre – the party leads everything," Mao said.

In the post-Mao era, there has been an established rule that the division of power in the so-called four major branches of government – the party, the government, the legislature and political consultative body – is shared between different PSC members.

Xi heads the party, state, and army, Premier Li is in charge of the State Council and the cabinet, Zhang Dejiang (張德江) heads the National People's Congress and Yu Zhengsheng (俞正聲) heads the advisory body, the People's Political Consultative Conference.

In the past few weeks – in response to Xi's call – regional officials have been scrambling to make public pledges swearing their political allegiance to Xi, reviving a common practice from the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, the final decade of Mao's rule.

Up to now, at least half the nation's provincial party chiefs have made public pledges to "voluntarily safeguard the core position of General Secretary Xi".

**Peidong Yang, a postdoctoral fellow in sociology at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, described the move by provincial party leaders as "acts of swearing loyalty to Xi".**

**Yang said: "This seems quite clear, given that they almost unanimously stressed their staunch support and their overall sense of allegiance for Xi at the core of the party."**

Analysts believe such statements are tantamount to suggesting Xi's superior status among the nation's seven most senior leaders. Some said Xi's two recent calls to party members were part of his concerted effort to secure the political loyalty of colleagues in both of the highest-ruling bodies.

They said the rare departure from party protocol by reporting on a PSC meeting was an attempt by Xi to publicise his absolute authority within the party's innermost cabinet.

In the years since he came to office in late 2012, Xi has succeeded in projecting himself as the most powerful leader since Deng – and even since Mao – as well as one of the world's most powerful international leaders.

He has assumed more important positions than any of his predecessors, having acquired leading roles in the seven most powerful central leading groups spanning the party, state, economy and military. The powers of these leading groups supersede the powers of all of the most important party and government establishments, headed by Xi's other Politburo or PSC colleagues.

Xi is now able to rely on his small circle of loyal aides and advisers to run the country, while sidelining many colleagues in the other branches of government.

Li Zhanshu, head of the general office of the party's Central Committee, has no government title to suggest he should be involved in diplomacy. Yet he has an explicit role in foreign policy as head of the general office of the party's National Security Commission, established by Xi in 2013.

Liu is chief of the General Office serving the Leading Group for

Financial and Economic Affairs, a group once headed by the premier, but now headed by Xi.

However, Xi, who is the son of a revolutionary, apparently lacks the necessary mandate to make his leadership unquestionable and as authoritative as that of Mao – credited for founding the communist republic – or Deng – hailed as the architect of China's transformation from economic backwater into the world's second largest economy.

Analysts say the campaign is also part of renewed efforts by Xi to further consolidate his power amid increasing challenges at home and abroad.

"The current call for party members to align themselves with the party's central core authority is part of efforts by Xi and his team to regain power in a political regime that governs all aspects of China, and also a warning to those who want to deviate from the guiding principles of the central government," said Xigen Li, an associate professor at Hong Kong's City University.

Steve Tsang, professor of contemporary Chinese studies at Britain's University of Nottingham, said: "Xi is building up his power through party rectification, and is going further than any of his predecessors since Mao, arguably even further than Deng."

He said moving to "unify the thinking" of leaders and others in the party was "going quite far" – something that former president Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) had certainly never done, and Hu's predecessor, Jiang Zemin (江澤民), had not been successful in achieving.

"Xi is pushing, and is using the enhanced might of the party machine and the state security apparatus to do that," Tsang said, adding that some resistance remained and was probably still well entrenched. "The unrelenting push made by Xi reveals to me that he has not yet succeeded in his aims, and also the strength of resistance that exists."

Tsang said if Xi had already achieved his aim of asserting his control, then by now he would be focusing on pushing his agenda forward and ensuring he achieved his goals. "Instead, he is still focusing on consolidating his power and position."

Xigen Li said that within any political group, there was a centrifugal force that resulted in thoughts and practices moving away from the mainstream.

"Such deviation occurs more frequently when society is undergoing significant changes, which is what China currently faces, with regard to the current economic and political challenges," Li said.

For all his current power, Xi and the party certainly face a string of serious challenges. The mainland economy is slowing at a pace unseen in recent memory;



Paramilitary police stand in front of a portrait of Mao Zedong.

**Xi wants to achieve even more [power] than Mao and Deng**

ZHANG MING, RENMIN UNIVERSITY

last year's 6.9 per cent growth in annual gross domestic product was the lowest since 1990 – leading billionaire investor George Soros to suggest the mainland economy is headed for a hard landing.

The Chinese stock market has fallen more than 20 per cent this year, and the value of the yuan has slipped. Capital outflow continues, at around the US\$1 trillion annual rate estimated for last year.

The leadership must tackle problems such as deflation, excess industrial capacity and a mountain of debt incurred by local governments.

In diplomacy, China faces a challenge from the United States under President Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia" foreign-policy shift, which includes a Washington-led 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact signed earlier in February.

Beijing is also engaged in territorial disputes with Japan in the East China Sea and with several southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea. It has to tackle a further challenge in Taiwan following the landslide election victory by the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party.

**Yang said that strengthening Xi's personal authority through these campaigns would help to overcome resistance because such propaganda and publicity created an intangible but high-pressured atmosphere.**

It was clear, Yang said, looking back at Xi's actions since becoming party secretary – especially the setting up of leading groups with himself as the chairperson – that the president believed a strong personal authority was necessary to achieve his reform goals.

However, some analysts warned that Xi's strong leadership would also have negative impacts.

Tsang said there were two main dangers in Xi's approach.

First, if Xi continued to focus on consolidating his power for too long, it could end up becoming the goal itself, and he would fail to secure those other goals meant to define his place in history.

Second, Xi's unrelenting focus on consolidating his power would continue to antagonise many within the establishment.

Xigen Li said: "Consolidating power might increase the efficiency and effectiveness of policy implementation, but it won't necessarily produce positive results."

Renmin University's Zhang said: "Xi wants to achieve even more [power] than Mao and Deng, but such political overambition will not necessarily mean he achieves his goal."

He said it appeared Xi wanted a status equal to or exceeding those held by Mao and Deng.

"However, he lacks such credibility because Mao and Deng had to earn such respect within the [party's] ruling circle," Zhang said.



The Politburo Standing Committee: Zhang Gaoli, Liu Yunshan, Zhang Dejiang, Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, Yu Zhengsheng, Wang Qishan. Photo: Xinhua

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The next congress will see this many of the seven PSC members retire – all except Xi and Li