

Is Xi Jinping in Control for the Fourth Term?

A Reality Check

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Xi Jinping has amassed more personal power than any Chinese leader in decades. Since becoming General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, Xi has systematically centralised authority abolishing presidential term limits, installing loyalists and also purging them. This article endeavours to examine the current state of Xi's control by analysing two competing theories of 'Xi losing control amid emerging fissures' and that 'Xi remains in full control'. Xi's aggressive purge strategy has indeed concentrated power in his hands, but also set in a deep-seated insecurity at the top leading to internal power dynamics, abolishing informal rule of elders, perceived conflict with PLA on sacking of senior officers. This likely paranoia and various other factors have also led to some social and economic downturn affecting his leadership. A detailed assessment of all such factors led to likely conclusion that Xi is still in full control and shall be re-elected in the 21st CPC, less some black swan event.

Keywords: Xi Jinping; China; Communist Party Congress (CPC); Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

INTRODUCTION

Xi Jinping has amassed more personal power than any Chinese leader in decades. Since becoming General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party

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(CCP) in 2012, Xi has systematically centralised authority by abolishing presidential term limits, installing loyalists in key positions and enshrining ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ in the constitution. At the 20th Communist Party Congress (CPC) in October 2022, Xi secured an unprecedented third term, cementing what appeared to be unassailable control over both the CCP and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Yet, recent events and information/actions have sparked debate world over on the stability of Xi’s rule. A series of abrupt purges of senior officials, mounting economic troubles and murmurs of discontent among party elites and the public have led some observers to argue that Xi’s grip is weakening. Others contend that these very developments prove Xi is firmly in charge and ruthlessly weeding out rivals (including confidants) and consolidating power in preparation for the CCP’s 21st National Congress in 2027.¹

This article endeavours to examine the current state of Xi’s control by analysing two competing theories—Theory 1, Xi is losing control amid emerging fissures in the CCP and the PLA; and Theory 2, Xi remains in full control, having vanquished rival factions and tightened his command. The analysis draws on detailed evidence from recent documents, articles, expert commentaries and insights to clarify their implications.

PURGES AND POWER SHIFTS: XI’S DWINDLING CONFIDENCE

One of the clearest manifestations of turmoil under Xi’s third term has been a wave of purges targeting high-ranking officials in both the military and civilian hierarchies. In 2023–24, numerous top figures, including ministers and generals, were abruptly removed or investigated, often with little official explanation. On 28 November 2024, China’s defence ministry announced the suspension of Admiral Miao Hua, the PLA’s head of political work and a member of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Miao Hua’s ouster was striking as he was the fourth-highest ranking officer in the PLA and one of Xi’s long-time protégés tasked with ensuring military loyalty. His fall marked the third purge of a top political commissar under Xi and meant that one-third of the 20th CMC’s members had been removed within two years. Around the same time, two former PLA generals—You Haitao, Deputy Commander of PLA Ground Force, and Li Pengcheng, Commander of People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), Southern Theatre Command—were also purged, and rumours swirled about investigations into other senior officers (including, briefly, Defence Minister Dong Jun).²

These military purges coincided with a broader shake-up across the Party-state. According to official statistics, in the first three quarters of 2024

alone, at least 58 high-ranking civilian cadres were dismissed and 642,000 officials at various levels were punished. Within the CCP Central Committee elected in 2022, at least eight full members (out of 205) had been purged by late 2024 (one died by suicide while under investigation); another eight were absent from key meetings, etc.; and three more were effectively sidelined. In all, roughly 9 per cent of the CCP's top governing body had been purged or were under investigation or disciplinary action in just two years.³ This churn is extraordinary, especially given that these officials were largely hand-picked by Xi himself.⁴

Logic defies such purges, but the question is: why is Xi casting out so many of his own? One interpretation is that these purges are symptoms of internal crisis and an evidence that Xi's vaunted unity is cracking. Indeed, analysts note that Xi's third term 'has not resulted in elite solidarity or the ebb of purges'⁵, but rather 'unceasing political storms' and surprise personnel upheavals. The fallen officials include some of Xi's recent favourites, suggesting infighting or serious governance failures. As one analysis puts it,⁶ the purges at the top clearly show that Xi Jinping is weakened and has been forced to sack protégés whom he himself promoted. From this point of view, each purge hints at factional tussles or disobedience. For example, Xi's removal of two consecutive defence ministers (General Wei Fenghe in 2022 and his successor, General Li Shangfu, in 2023), and the investigation of a possible third (Dong Jun) indicate possible turmoil in the military establishment. Over a dozen PLA generals have also been purged since mid-2023, and Xi's initial anti-corruption drive in the armed forces (begun a decade ago) possibly failed to eliminate entrenched misconduct and disloyalty. In short, Xi would not be purging his inner circle unless he felt something was amiss—whether corruption, incompetence or potential factions—which implies that all is not well within the Party.

However, a contrarian interpretation of these purges is that they reflect strength, not weakness; that is, they are a calculated effort by Xi to fortify his position by removing any possible challengers or weak links. From this perspective, the purges at the top clearly show that Xi Jinping is firmly in control, having consolidated his power in the first year of his unprecedented third term. Xi appears unafraid to sack even protégés whom he recently promoted, demonstrating that no one is untouchable in his quest to root out corruption and tighten his control over the PLA and the Party. In other words, Xi is wielding Stalin-style tactics to pre-empt threats and enforce loyalty. Indeed, some purges have directly targeted remnants of rival factions or the protégés of retired leaders, thereby eliminating alternative power centres. For instance, Xi's long-running anti-corruption campaign in the Party saw the

downfall of heavyweights linked to former presidents, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (such as Zhou Yongkang and Ling Jihua), and more recently, he has sidelined figures associated with the Communist Youth League faction (once patronised by Hu). By purging rival networks and even allies who falter, Xi has not only ensured that he is surrounded by loyalists but also that any lingering influence of the Party elders or past patronage is expunged.

In reality, both interpretations carry logic. Xi's aggressive purge strategy has indeed concentrated power in his hands, but it also betrays a deep-seated insecurity at the top. It can be inferred that China's post-2022 politics follows a 'Stalin logic' of governance. Thus, even after achieving ultra-concentration of authority, the leader feels compelled to keep purging officials with new intensity, including his own allies. This paradoxical cycle breeds further instability in Xi's ultra-concentration of power, coinciding with his inability to overcome economic difficulties, leading to more purging, tighter social control and rising social grievances.

HAVE INTERNAL POWER DYNAMICS WITHIN THE CCP SHIFTED?

Compared to previous eras, the internal power dynamics of the CCP have shifted dramatically under Xi's rule. In the decade before Xi took power, Chinese leadership operated on a model of collective norms and factional balance, wherein the Party elders retained behind-the-scenes influence and top bodies, like the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), often included representatives of different cliques (for example, Hu Jintao's Communist Youth League faction alongside Jiang Zemin's 'Shanghai faction'). Xi upended that model. At the 20th CPC in 2022, he broke the convention by filling the seven-member PSC entirely with his loyalists. Long-time rivals or independent power brokers were retired or sidelined, leaving his loyalists installed in prominent positions across the Party and state. This reorganisation signalled how firm Xi's grip had become—essentially a 'Party of One' as the authority.

In practice, Xi now holds all the key levers: General Secretary of the CCP; President of the state; and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. He also leads dozens of central committees on everything from national security to economic reform, making him the ultimate decision-maker in every domain. The result is that formal checks on Xi's power remain unchallenged and there are no rival politburo heavyweights or elder statesmen who can meaningfully oppose his directives. Even the concept of 'collective leadership'

has been subtly challenged. Notably, in 2024, the PLA's official newspaper praised the virtues of collective leadership,⁷ which some interpreted as a veiled critique of Xi's insistence on concentrating decision-making in a single voice of authority. The centralisation leaves Xi in full command of the CCP. He has imposed strict controls on the Party elders and retired officials since his first day in office, effectively neutralising their collective influence.⁸ The security staff under Xi have replaced the personal aides and drivers of former senior leaders to monitor their activities. In addition, these leaders have to take approval for any gatherings or travel, which restricts their movement. This has curtailed the once-common practice of retired politburo members lobbying or coordinating behind the scenes. The old, informal rule by elders that Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin exercised well into retirement has been largely removed by Xi's measures.

Most of the influential elders are also no longer on the scene: Jiang Zemin passed away in 2022; and former Premier Li Keqiang's sudden death in 2023 removed another admired figure. With Hu Jintao visibly frail (and unceremoniously escorted out of the last Congress), no past leader is in a position to challenge Xi. Even if they harbour reservations, their networks have been dismantled—like the Communist Youth League faction tied to Hu Jintao saw its standard-bearers (like Hu Chunhua) demoted—and protégés of other elders have been removed or marginalised over a period of time.⁹ In short, Xi has orchestrated a leadership line-up with no counterweights. During the National Day banquet in end 2024, former Premier Wen Jiabao and former Chairman Li Ruihuan were seated on either side of Xi. This was widely read as a conciliatory signal that Xi was willing to heed advice or warnings from the Party elders, implying an acknowledgement that he needed to reassure the old guard, even if symbolically.¹⁰

In terms of formal power dynamics, the factional landscape has been reshaped entirely in Xi's favour. By purging officials linked to past networks, Xi has purged those he regarded as potential competitors, including fellow princelings and Youth League allies of his predecessors. Many princelings who might have once rivalled Xi were either co-opted or sidelined early (for example, Bo Xilai's downfall), and some have fled abroad and become outspoken critics. The remaining elites echo the designation of Xi as the Party's 'core' leader and have amended the Party charters to further elevate his status. For now, Xi has achieved the leadership that is ostensibly unified under his command, though that unity is probably maintained through heavy-handed discipline and the silencing of dissent.

XI'S CONTROL OVER THE PLA: DISLOYALTY AND MALFEASANCE?

Xi Jinping's authority extends to the PLA, where he serves as Chairman of the CMC—effectively as the commander-in-chief. Ensuring the PLA's loyalty has been a cornerstone of Xi's agenda, encapsulated in his mantra, 'the Party commands the gun'. In his early years in power, Xi launched a sweeping anti-corruption campaign in the PLA, taking down top generals, like Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong (both former CMC vice chairs), for graft. That campaign was meant to cleanse the military and solidify Xi's control over a PLA that had grown bloated and politicised under previous leaders. By the late 2010s, Xi installed generals who were considered to be loyal to him at the top. So, observers largely viewed the PLA as firmly under Xi's control, until the upheavals of 2023.¹¹

Over the past year-and-a half, the PLA has been rocked by Xi's second purge¹² which started in mid-2023, with over a dozen top generals being removed or placed under investigation. This purge encompassed the two most recent defence ministers, General Wei Fenghe and General Li Shangfu, making it an unprecedented situation where two consecutive defence chiefs fell to corruption probes (Dong Jun would have been the third in a row; though, as of late 2024, Dong reappeared publicly, suggesting he might have been cleared or spared). Even more alarming was the purge within the PLA Rocket Force's leadership. Xi fired both the Rocket Force commander and commissar and replaced them with outsiders (including a navy admiral to lead the Rocket Force), indicating his distrust of the unit's internal cadre. Additionally, several senior officers in the PLA's Equipment Development Department (in charge of weapons procurement) and executives in the defence industry were purged on charges of corruption. The high point was Admiral Miao Hua's suspension in late 2024, whose role was literally to enforce loyalty and Party discipline within the military.

These events raise a critical question: can Xi truly control the PLA or is the military brass riddled with disloyalty and malfeasance? The answer is nuanced. The purges expose serious integrity and loyalty problems in the PLA. Xi's renewed crackdown implies that despite a decade of efforts, corruption has remained endemic. The Rocket Force purges can be interpreted as Xi's reaction to discovering something rotten at the core of China's missile forces—whether financial corruption or even potential security breach. It may be noted that an extraordinary CMC Political Work Conference was held on 17–19 June 2024 at the revolutionary base of Yan'an (a site harking back to Mao-era rectification campaigns). There, Xi admonished the assembled military elite to engage in soul-searching reflections and make

earnest rectifications, emphasising that political loyalty is the lifeline of the PLA. The suspension of Miao Hua indicates that the ongoing purges are beyond anti-corruption or financial misdeeds and, more importantly, include political disloyalty.

Xi's governance style blends with his likely ambition to consolidate power, and also advance national goals in the present geopolitical/economic scenario. The shift is clearly towards economic prudence, while maintaining assertive stance on regional security coupled with global influence.¹³ This is also echoed in *Qiushi*, the official theoretical journal of the CCP, through essays that emphasise self-revolution (*ziwo geming*) and political security as core concepts of Xi Jinping. Although the economic and security parameters are highlighted, political security of the CCP has always been placed first by Xi, as articulated in 'Ten Insistences'.¹⁴

The persistence of purges hints that Xi is still struggling to fully trust the PLA that he leads. However, this willingness to purge and reshuffle the PLA leadership also underlines his unrivalled authority over the PLA. It further demonstrates that even the highest generals serve at his will and can be purged. There is no sign of any PLA faction openly resisting Xi's moves. Senior officers, like CMC's Vice Chair General Zhang Youxia (a long-time associate of Xi), who are considered loyal, have stepped in to steady the ship (Zhang, currently under investigation, for example, co-chaired key meetings of top brass in late 2024).¹⁵ It is analysed that the current turmoil might actually dampen China's preparations for conflict in the short term. By rooting out unreliable elements, probably Xi aims to forge a PLA that is more loyal and truly prepared for the worst-case scenario that he frequently refers to.

In short, Xi retains formal and practical control of the PLA, but his recent purges indicate serious internal problems that he feels compelled to address. The Chinese military has made significant modernisation gains in recent years despite corruption, and there is no question who is in command. Yet, the fact that Xi still remains unsure of the PLA's leadership, and their commitment to the Party, even after 12-plus years of his chairmanship is surprising. It suggests that Xi's control, while absolute on paper, relies on continuous political vigilance and enforcement.

ROLE OF THE PARTY ELDERS IN XI'S ERA

The role of the Party elders has been an important factor in Chinese elite politics. Historically, the CCP elders have, at times, acted as behind-the-

scene king-makers or power-brokers. For instance, Deng Xiaoping, though formally retired, engineered leadership changes in the 1980s and the 1990s, and Jiang Zemin continued to exert influence after stepping down, mainly through protégés on the PSC. Xi Jinping, however, has moved aggressively to limit the influence of his predecessors. From the outset, he imposed tight restrictions on the activities of former PSC members. As mentioned earlier, their staff has been replaced with people loyal to Xi, and they have also been barred from travelling or convening gatherings without approval. In effect, Xi has choked off the informal networks through which elders, like Jiang or Hu, might have rallied support or critiqued policy. This is a stark departure from the relatively consultative approach of Hu Jintao, who had to share space with an active Jiang Zemin in the 2000s. Under Xi, the expectation is that retired leaders fade away politically, as he consolidates a ‘new era’ centred on his own leadership.

Xi’s control is evident from the fact that by late 2023, with Jiang Zemin deceased and Hu Jintao in ill health, he stood virtually unchallenged by any elder of equal stature. Other figures, like Zhu Rongji or Wen Jiabao¹⁶ (former premiers and known advocates of market reforms), were old and held no formal sway, though their words did carry moral weight among the Party members. Indeed, Wen Jiabao authored a public essay in 2021 ‘My Mother’, a tribute to *Yang Zhijun* where he stressed moral governance and probably indirect reference to Li Keqiang. These writings were quickly censored online, reflecting the reduced influence of elders in the Party.

Today, the Party elders have virtually no leverage over Xi as they cannot mobilise the military, nor do they command loyalty within the current PSC which is held by Xi’s men. Xi has also institutionalised the powers of the General Secretary and banned informal old-person politics to ensure that once leaders retire, they stay out of decision-making.¹⁷ The message is clear that the past leaders or their followers should not meddle in Xi’s ‘new era’.

It is also to be noted that many of Xi’s recent purges have targeted officials considered close to former leaders. The removal of General Li Shangfu and investigation of his mentor General Zhang Youxia’s associates can be seen as eliminating any remnants of influence from Zhang’s generation (Zhang Youxia himself, a Xi ally, is due to retire in 2027). Earlier, the anti-corruption take-downs of certain figures, like Sun Zhengcai (Party Secretary, Chongqing and Jilin) and Ling Jihua (Vice Chairman, Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference), removed individuals who were protégés of elders (Ling was Hu Jintao’s top aide and Sun was seen as groomed by Jiang Zemin/

Zeng Qinghong). With the removal of such people, the elders lack loyalists in office to champion their agenda. Even if an elder like Zeng Qinghong (a powerful Jiang lieutenant) has opinions, his network in the current leadership is virtually nil. The survival of Wang Huning or Zhao Leji in the PSC does not equate to elder influence, as they have clearly exhibited their loyalty to Xi.

Currently, the Party elders serve more as a barometer of elite concern than as drivers of change. Xi's consolidation of power has decisively tamed the elder factor, ensuring that no senior statesman can dominate the Party's decisions, as Deng once did. So, while the elders' discontent is a sign of internal fissure, it remains a largely insignificant one in terms of restraining Xi's will.

Overall, Xi has transformed the erstwhile collective norms mechanism to more centralised, personalised control, mainly through anti-corruption campaign and in the name of Party discipline. The absence of informal mechanisms, like consensus building within party, factional bargaining and elder mediation, has probably increased bitterness in the political structure of the CCP, which may lead to fractures within the Party.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES: A DILEMMA

Beyond the politics of purges and control of the Party and the PLA, Xi's authority is also being tested by China's economic headwinds and public mood. Presently, China's economy is encountering its most serious challenges, wherein the growth has slowed, youth unemployment has soared to record levels, the real estate sector has slid into crisis, local governments face debt crunches and public confidence has ebbed, coupled with the United States (US)–China trade war (the US tariffs). These problems do not directly equate to political revolt, but they erode the aura of competence that bolsters the CCP rule and can stir social discontent, indirectly shaping Xi's latitude in governance. This unprecedented crisis has caused job scarcity and has left many educated young Chinese frustrated and demoralised.¹⁸ Popular slang has captured the zeitgeist movements, like 'lying flat' (*tǎng píng*; rejecting gruelling work in favour of minimal effort) and 'let it rot' (*bǎi làn*; approach in face of hopeless situations), reflecting the generation's cynicism about its prospects.¹⁹ Such passive resistance signals a challenge to Xi's narrative of national rejuvenation.

These factors support the first theory that worsening economic and social conditions are undermining Xi's standing. If China's economy continues to underperform due to stagnating incomes, job scarcity and rising inequality,

then the Party could face a crisis of confidence. Also, China's middle class, once a pillar of stability, is showing anxiety, and some people have emigrated or moved assets abroad. Indeed, the Party elders and technocrats have subtly pointed to economic woes as a governance failure, implicitly critiquing Xi's more centralised, state-driven approach.²⁰ The longer youth unemployment and other problems persist, the more questions will be raised (quietly or openly) about Xi and his policy.

However, the second theory holds that Xi is still firmly in command despite these challenges, and that discontent is being managed before it can threaten the regime. It is worth noting that after the 2022 'white paper' protests,²¹ there have been no comparable nationwide demonstrations. The state's security apparatus, enhanced under Xi, has been largely successful in containing organised dissent.

The present economic and social undercurrents pose a significant but not yet regime-threatening challenge to Xi. They contribute to elite unease and popular cynicism, supporting the notion that Xi's aura has dimmed compared to the boom years. Yet, Xi's government continues to project confidence and has tools to contain unrest. Barring a sharper economic collapse or a major policy fiasco, public discontent alone is unlikely to loosen Xi's grip in the near term—but it remains a key vulnerability that could interact with elite fractures if things worsen.

WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR THE CCP

Looking ahead, one of the biggest questions is: how long Xi Jinping will remain in power and who might succeed him? Xi's abolition of term limits and the lack of an obvious heir apparent mean that uncertainty looms over succession, which can itself be destabilising. As Xi approaches the 2027 CPC (which would mark the end of his third term and likely the start of a fourth), the issue of succession will become harder to ignore. Xi has given no indication of grooming a successor, as any such move will weaken his authority. This has two implications: it reinforces the notion that Xi intends to stay in full control for the foreseeable future (supporting Theory 2); and it also raises the stakes of an internal crisis (supporting Theory 1, in that a sudden loss of Xi's grip could trigger a succession battle).

Potential challengers to Xi are not identifiable/existent in the current leadership of the Party or the PLA (only three are left in CMC, post the purging). All six members of the current PSC are Xi loyalists in their sixties or older, and none have the stature or independent base to pose a challenge.

The new Premier, Li Qiang, who owes his rise to Xi's patronage (he was Xi's former chief of staff in Zhejiang), has shown no sign of divergent views, though, of late, there seems to be some support for Li Qiang from some former elders and the PLA. Others, like Ding Xuexiang (Xi's long-time aide) or Cai Qi, are even more clearly extensions of Xi's governance. If one were to speculate, Li Qiang might harbour ambitions, but he is constrained by the fact that his fate is tied to Xi's success. Outside the PSC, younger officials in the politburo, such as Chen Min'er (Party Secretary, Tianjin), Chen Jining (Party Secretary, Shanghai) or Li Ganjie (Chief, United Front Work Department), could be future contenders, but they would only come into play if Xi decides to elevate them—something that he has avoided. In essence, Xi has engineered a leadership environment with no one obviously waiting. This very success in crowding out competitors underscores how secure Xi's position at the top is right now. It suggests that heading into 2027, Xi can smoothly obtain another term as the Party chief as there is no organised opposition to block him.

From the perspective of Theory 2 (full control), Xi's succession strategy is simply to 'not have one'. Historical CCP precedent shows that once a successor is named, power begins to flow away from the incumbent to the heir, which is something Xi wants to avoid at all costs. As an analyst from Asia Society states: 'Naming a successor could undermine Xi's authority²²...The successor would provide a focal point that makes it easier for Party insiders to rally against Xi's leadership in a moment of crisis.' Hence, it appears that Xi is determined not to repeat the mistake of Hu Jintao, who had to share influence with an anointed successor-in-waiting (Xi himself). Instead, Xi might aim to rule for another decade, taking him into the 2030s. By then, if he feels secure, he could attempt to orchestrate a controlled succession to a trusted loyalist who would carry on his legacy and protect his interests after retirement. It may be reasonably concluded that the 21st CPC in 2027 would extend Xi's mandate further and/or hint at a successor to be unveiled in the 2030s. In either case, for the next five-year term, Xi's dominance would be reaffirmed, solidifying the second theory's claim that he is firmly in charge and preparing for his fourth term.

The analysis suggests a paradoxical answer: Xi is both unrivalled in power and yet not unassailable in practice. Xi has concentrated authority to a degree unseen since Mao. He has purged opposing factions, silenced dissenting voices and filled the CCP and the PLA leadership with those loyal (or at least submissive) to him. As of early 2025, there is no institutional challenge that could prevent Xi from ruling as long as he wishes. Recent

purges, from ministers to generals, demonstrate that Xi can eliminate even high-level Party members with impunity, reinforcing the notion that he remains firmly in command. With the Party propaganda hailing him as the 'core' leader and no successor waiting in line, Xi's domination of the CCP apparatus is near total. In this sense, the second theory holds true that Xi has successfully consolidated power and is likely to lead China in the 21st National Congress and beyond.

In evaluating the current state of Xi's rule, it may be most accurate to say that Xi Jinping is in full control, but of a system that is showing strains under the weight of his one-man rule. His authority at the top is intact and unchallenged in any open way. Yet, the need for ever-more purges, the policy uncertainty and the very absence of a succession plan, all suggest a leadership that cannot relax or rely on institutional stability. Xi has built a formidable concentration of power as China heads towards the 21st CPC in 2027, which he is likely to consolidate further so as to present a united front and achieve his key goals. Whether he succeeds will determine if his reign is remembered as an era of enduring strength or the prelude to turbulence. For now, the balance of power favours Xi, who is in control of the CCP and the PLA.

NOTES

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