



THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY ELITE AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract

This essay examines the dominant role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elite in shaping China's foreign policy. It explores how centralized authority—especially under Xi Jinping—has enabled a cohesive yet rigid approach to international affairs. The CCP elite influence key foreign policy areas such as relations with the United States, Taiwan, and the Belt and Road Initiative through strategic control, ideological framing, and long-term planning. While this centralized model provides policy consistency, it also limits flexibility and adaptability in global diplomacy. Understanding the structure and mindset of the CCP elite is essential for interpreting China's foreign policy behavior in today's multipolar world.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party (CCP), General Secretary, People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Ministry of Commerce, Foreign Policy, issues, BRI, Global South, "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), since its founding in 1921 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, has maintained a tight grip on the political, economic, and ideological life of the country. The elite members of the CCP — particularly those within the Politburo and its Standing Committee — are central figures in shaping China's foreign policy. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as the ruling political entity in the People's Republic of



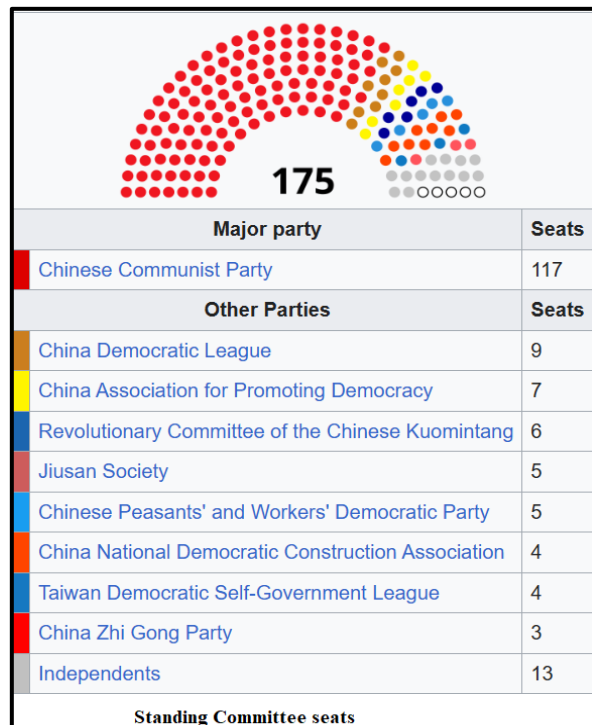
China, has an outsized influence on every aspect of governance — including foreign policy. Unlike democratic systems where foreign policy often reflects a broader range of institutional voices, China’s foreign affairs are guided by a highly centralized power structure. At the heart of this structure are the elite members of the CCP — especially those within the Politburo, its Standing Committee, and the top leadership under General Secretary Xi Jinping. This elite group plays a dominant role in shaping, directing, and executing the country’s strategies on the global stage. This essay explores how the CCP elite influence China’s foreign policy, their methods, key areas of concern, and the broader implications of this influence for international affairs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Centralized Power and Foreign Policy Control

This briefing paper challenges the conventional wisdom that China functions as a unitary player in its foreign policymaking process. In reality, Beijing’s approach to external issues is a result of intense bargaining between numerous subnational authorities with a wide range of objectives. [1]

China’s political system is structured around the CCP, and its foreign policy apparatus reflects that. Unlike in pluralist systems where ministries or independent think tanks may drive diplomacy, in China, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs operates largely as an executor of policies crafted by the top leadership. The Central Foreign Affairs Commission, chaired by Xi Jinping, is the key organ that oversees all foreign policy activities, including





diplomacy, trade, defense, and intelligence coordination.

This structure ensures that the elite — especially Xi and his closest allies — have direct control over China’s international engagement. Decisions are tightly coordinated across different state bodies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the Ministry of Commerce, and major state-owned enterprises (SOEs) involved in foreign investment and development projects.

Xi Jinping’s Central Role

Since becoming General Secretary in 2012, Xi Jinping has consolidated more power than any leader since Mao Zedong. Under his leadership, China has adopted a more assertive and ambitious foreign policy. Xi’s foreign policy vision is encapsulated in slogans such as the “China Dream,” “Major Country Diplomacy,” and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These are not just symbolic — they reflect a strategic ambition to reshape global norms and position China as a central player in international affairs.

Already in 2018, the party constitution was revised in a way that binds any future successor by having the outgoing leader named as an indispensable part of the organization. It departs from the established custom of group decision-making and diminishes efforts toward more institutionalization of the CCP. [2]

Xi has also centralized foreign policy decision-making to an unprecedented degree. He personally heads many leading groups and commissions on foreign affairs and national security. His direct involvement signals both the importance the CCP places on foreign policy and the desire for ideological consistency in how China deals with the world.

Xi’s ability to quickly shift the policy tone reflects his power. Xi is arguably the most powerful leader in the history of the People’s Republic of China. He has eliminated potential factional rivals and elevated confidantes to positions based on their personal loyalty to him, running the country without credible rivals. Decision-making under Xi has completely shifted from the consensus-building model started by Deng, China’s first post-Mao leader, and has become a Xi-in-command model of decision by top-level design. [3]



The CCP elite view international affairs through a political-legal lens rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology. They emphasize sovereignty, non-interference, and state-to-state relations. This worldview often brings them into conflict with liberal international norms such as human rights interventionism, freedom of navigation, or democratic accountability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The CCP elite see the United States as China's primary strategic rival. Tensions over trade, technology, Taiwan, and human rights have deepened in recent years. In response, the CCP leadership has adopted a "dual circulation" strategy to reduce dependence on foreign markets, while simultaneously using diplomatic tools like "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy to push back against Western criticism.

The CCP elite shape this policy through a mix of ideology and realpolitik. Their goal is to assert China's sovereignty, resist perceived foreign interference, and challenge what they call a "unipolar" world dominated by the U.S. Leaders like Xi Jinping frame this competition as a struggle between different governance models — authoritarian socialism vs. liberal democracy — further hardening China's foreign policy posture.

For the CCP elite, Taiwan is a "core interest" and a matter of national unity. The leadership has repeatedly emphasized that peaceful reunification is the preferred path, but the use of force remains an option. CCP policy on Taiwan is driven not only by strategic concerns but by political legitimacy. Xi Jinping, in particular, has tied the success of "national rejuvenation" to the reunification with Taiwan. The PRC views the island as a renegade province and vows to eventually "unify" Taiwan with the mainland, preferably by peaceful means but by force if necessary. In Taiwan, which has its own democratically elected government and is home to twenty-three million people, political leaders have differing views on the island's status and relations with the mainland.[4]

The elite use a combination of military pressure (through exercises and incursions near Taiwan), diplomatic isolation (blocking Taiwan's participation in international organizations), and economic influence (targeted sanctions or incentives) to manage cross-strait relations. The CCP's rigid stance is shaped at



the top, with little room for compromise due to ideological and domestic political pressures.

The BRI, Xi Jinping's flagship foreign policy project, reflects how the CCP elite use economic tools to extend China's global influence. Through infrastructure loans, development aid, and strategic investments, the BRI aims to create a China-centered network of trade and diplomacy.

The elite place great emphasis on shaping international narratives about China. State media, cultural diplomacy, Confucius Institutes, and global social media campaigns are used to promote a favorable image of China and discredit critics. This is part of a broader campaign to redefine global discourse — for instance, by promoting “Chinese-style modernization” as an alternative to Western development models.

The CCP elite are known for their long-term thinking. Rather than relying on abrupt changes, they often adopt incremental strategies to achieve foreign policy goals. This includes building artificial islands in the South China Sea over years, slowly tightening control over Hong Kong, or gradually expanding influence in multilateral institutions. For instance, The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) stepped up its aggressive actions near disputed shoals in the South China Sea in early December 2023 despite recent high-level discussions and an international tribunal's 2016 ruling that the area is within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). [5]

The central role of the CCP elite in foreign policy has made China a more predictable yet less flexible actor on the world stage. Because decisions are driven from the top, policy reversals are rare and compromise is difficult — especially on “core issues” like Taiwan or territorial disputes.

On the positive side, the elite's emphasis on strategic consistency and long-term planning has allowed China to maintain stable and enduring partnerships with many countries, particularly in the Global South. However, the lack of transparency, the merging of ideological and strategic goals, and an aversion to criticism make China's foreign policy less adaptive in fast-changing global crises.



CONSLUSION

The Chinese Communist Party elite, through centralized authority and ideological control, play a dominant role in shaping China's foreign policy. Their decisions are not merely administrative but deeply tied to political legitimacy, historical narratives, and national identity. Under Xi Jinping, this elite group has adopted a more assertive international posture, characterized by ambition, nationalism, and strategic calculation. While this has helped China rise as a major global power, it also creates challenges — both for China's engagement with the world and for the international community seeking cooperation on shared global issues. Understanding the mindset and mechanisms of the CCP elite is essential for navigating China's future role in international affairs.

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