

China is moving towards one-man rule

By Michael Sheridan, The Times, 22 February 2016

China is moving towards one-man rule as the state media step up demands for loyalty to President Xi Jinping, a departure from the Communist Party's collective leadership of recent decades.

Last week the party's flagship newspaper issued a call for Mr Xi to have the power to "remake the political landscape of China". The article, supposedly written by one of a literary group, was put out on a social media account run by the *People's Daily*. It said all communists must be loyal to Mr Xi and "line up with the leadership".

The campaign to enshrine Mr Xi

The campaign to enshrine Mr Xi as the infallible "core" of authority is worrying many inside the political elite and coincides with China exerting its military muscle and possibly preparing to change its nuclear weapons strategy.

The People's Liberation Army has just stationed surface-to-air missiles on a disputed island in the South China Sea. The Chinese expansion comes as Barack Obama rallies Asian nations to support free navigation in the strategic waterway. The prospect of one man dominating the party, the state and the army in China could be the most challenging test in the next US President's in-tray.

Mr Xi's grand plans include a total reorganisation of the Chinese military command structure that has included an internal debate about its nuclear weapons. Mr Xi recently formed a dedicated PLA rocket force to control the nuclear ballistic missile arsenal. A report for the Union of Concerned Scientists, a US-based group, says China may be considering placing its nuclear forces on alert, which means that, like America and Britain, its weapons would be ready to fire on command.

That would be a shift of position for a nation that affirms it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons in any conflict. China has already started an ambitious program to upgrade its older missiles with multiple warheads like those of other nuclear powers. Rising military budgets show that despite the slower Chinese economy and big flows of capital out of the country, Mr Xi is seizing any initiative to turn nationalism to his advantage. A source who grew up in the party's privileged compounds in Beijing said the moves harked back to another era: "There is a fear among the families, the long-time party members for generations, that this guy wants to make himself into another Chairman Mao and rule for life."

Like Mao

Like Mao, Mr Xi, 62, is using articles and essays in state media, often written by pseudonymous authors or published in the provinces, to intimidate enemies and promote himself.

Last week a social media platform controlled by the *Beijing Daily*, the voice of the capital's municipal committee, launched a striking attack on a party faction opposed to Mr Xi, the Communist Youth League. Officials connected to the league were "ambitious aristocrats whose self-serving attitude did no good to the party and led to scandals", it sneered.

Targeting the league — whose members include Prime Minister Li Keqiang and former president Hu Jintao — is a signal that Mr Xi has broken with the consensus set after the unrest of 1989 that the party's factions do not attack one another in public. A league connection — once a fast-track to promotion for young high-flyers — now seems to be a liability.

A study by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection — the party watchdog unleashed by Mr Xi against rivals accused of corruption — has criticised the “mentality” of league members. The commission's propaganda publication, the China Discipline Inspection Paper, warned against “those who form their own circles inside the party” and referred to fallen officials as “gangs”.

This Mao-era language

This Mao-era language singled out the “petroleum gang” under the purged security chief, Zhou Yongkang, whose cronies dominated the Chinese oil industry, and the “secretary gang” around Ling Jihua, a close aide to Mr Hu and a former league stalwart. Mr Ling is already under arrest on corruption and bribery charges.

Defining people as members of “gangs” or “cliques” is a classic tactic of communist in-fighting and a prelude to destroying them.

Chilled by the signals from the top, half the provincial party chiefs in the country this month pledged allegiance to Mr Xi as “the core”.

The term represents a significant change from the language used about Mr Xi's predecessors, Mr Hu and Jiang Zemin, who were referred to as being only “at the core” of a collective leadership.

The last strongman in China, Deng Xiaoping, exercised his power behind the scenes and scorned a cult of personality.

Absurd displays of sycophancy

But Mr Xi, like Mao, inspires absurd displays of sycophancy, such as an ode to “Big Brother” written by Pu Liye — a deputy editor at Xinhua who writes under the pen name Pu Zhuozi — to mark Mr Xi's visit to the news agency office on Friday. The poem drew widespread ridicule online.

It all points to a showdown next year at the party's 19th congress. The 25-member politburo will be shaken up, and five out of the seven posts on China's supreme ruling body, the politburo standing committee, will be vacated. That is when Mr Xi means to make his power complete.

According to Jeffrey Bader, who handled China policy for the Obama administration from 2009 to 2011, the verdict is open on whether China under Mr Xi will be a “revisionist” power that challenges the US in the Pacific.

In a paper for the Brookings Institution in Washington, Mr Bader wrote that China would “selectively adhere to international norms where they fit its interests and ignore or seek to change them where they do not”.

Claiming that Beijing must avoid the “Thucydides trap”

The *People's Daily* recently provided a twist on the thinking behind the rivalry. It cited an ancient Greek historian to explain why China needed a strong leader, claiming that Beijing must avoid the "Thucydides trap".

Thucydides, an Athenian general, wrote in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* that conflict between Athens and Sparta was inevitable because the Spartans feared the rising power of Athens. For Sparta, read America, for Athens, read China.

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