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## Securing the “China Dream”: What Xi Jinping wants to achieve with the National Security Commission (NSC)

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### Key findings:

- **China’s newly established National Security Commission (NSC) is built as a cross-cutting governance body, aiming at centralizing power to a level unprecedented since the death of Mao Zedong.**
- **The NSC may allow Chinese President Xi Jinping to overcome previous bureaucratic barriers and formulate long term strategies, mobilizing a wide spectrum of resources to deal with broadly defined national security issues efficiently, including China’s bargaining power in the global market.**
- **Although the foremost motivations of Xi to establish an NSC are to consolidate his political power and resolve domestic crisis, the establishment of China’s NSC might have significant impact on the existing order of global security.**
- **China is likely to leave the path of Deng Xiaoping’s “Hide and Bide” policy and pursue a much more proactive foreign and security policy in the near future.**
- **The “China Dream” put forth by Xi Jinping as his vision for China’s development aims at realizing “national rejuvenation”, which suggests that China is ready to openly and systematically translate its economic power into political and security clout in global affairs.**
- **Xi has laid out several ambitious plans that depict extensive areas of international initiative and influence for China, extending to the Middle East and Europe. These efforts would require an effective NSC for broad-based diplomatic and policy coordination.**

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Among Xi Jinping’s multiple reform initiatives since he assumed power in March 2013, the establishment of China’s national security

commission is a key project. This commission centralizes power to the highest degree since the death of Mao Zedong. Several major factors

contributed to the birth of the NSC in January 2014, which two previous presidents failed to establish.

According to China's official media Xinhua news agency, "the responsibilities of the commission will include the construction of a rule of law system concerning state security (sic), research, resolving major issues of national security, setting principles and policies, as well as stipulating and implementing strategies. **Its mission is to handle an all-inclusive range of conventional and unconventional national security affairs.**" (Xinhua, 2014) To fulfil these far-reaching goals, the current power structure of "collective leadership" based on a checks-and-balances principle set up in Deng Xiaoping's era will need to be modified to achieve a higher level of efficiency. Constitutional changes and comprehensive bureaucratic rearrangements need to be planned and carried out. This colossal project will require considerable efforts and time, and carries many political risks.

If Xi succeeds in implementing his design of the NSC, he will bring significant changes to China's foreign policy. It will divert from Deng Xiaoping's "Hide and Bide" principle kept for more than three decades. **China will be more proactive in international affairs, create more levers to advance its interests abroad, and maybe even begin to seek military alliances and provide security protection for weaker allies. This could result in significant changes of the global security structure over the next decade.**

### **Why could Xi Jinping build up the NSC, but not his predecessors?**

The first attempt to establish a national security commission (NSC) was made by President Jiang Zemin in 1997, whose intention was clearly to perpetuate his influence and return to the chairmanship system. The idea was said to be inspired by the National Security Council of the United States. Jiang's idea was rejected by other Politburo Standing Committee senior members, resulting in a compromise – the founding of the

National Security Leading Small Group (NSLSG) to coordinate national security affairs in 2000. NSLSG remains a sluggish supplementary coordination body that is mostly responsible for responding to irregular major crises. The power struggles ensuing from Jiang Zemin's unwilling retirement has made it even more difficult for Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, to establish a powerful cross-cutting security governance body.

However, the calls for an NSC continued for more than two decades, as China faced increasingly complex national security issues. Three major reasons contributed to the promulgation of the establishment of NSC by the Central Committee Reform plan in November 2013.

### **Xi's unstable success in the power struggle**

First, fierce tensions within the Communist Party leadership made it urgent for Xi to establish the NSA as an instrument to consolidate his power. In 2012, Xi met with severe opposition from powerful rivals prior to assuming the presidency. (Qin, 2012) His victory in this ongoing political battle has remained tentative and unstable. He launched an anti-corruption campaign since late 2012 which has brought him many resentments inside the bureaucratic system. As the majority of CPC's power centre, the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) is going to retire in 2017 (five out of seven) due to the age limit, various factions inside the party are eagerly competing to get hold of the coming vacancies. All these factors have added uncertainties to Xi's status as a leader and the prospects of his reform plans. Taking over the levers of national security is thus the precondition for Xi's steady control of power. An incomplete name list of the NSC members was disclosed in January 2014, which shows that Xi was eager to launch the NSC, but he had to, and still has to, bargain very hard with diverse factions over the personnel composition.

## Coping with rising domestic crisis

Second, the CPC government needs a more efficient body to better streamline the civilian and military side of the security apparatus, so as to cope with the increasing domestic pressures threatening its rule, as explained by various Chinese state media and scholars. **The foremost mission of the NSC is not to advance China's overseas interests and security, but to cope with the widespread social dissent that is causing more than 100,000 annual cases of social unrest nationwide.** (Lu/Li /Pei, 2012) These protests and riots are mostly against corruption, abuse of power, land grab, social inequality, environmental damage, minority rights and violation of labour rights. Environment-related unrest now increases at an annual rate of 30%. (CASS, 2013)

The current domestic security mechanisms built under former President Hu Jintao, the "System for Maintaining Stability (维稳系统)", encompasses the secret services, para-military and public security forces. Its mission is to keep social unrest under control. To obtain this goal, it features a fast growing budget that exceeds the defence budget. But its focus on suppressing the dissent with force not only fails to address the causes, but also creates resentment among the population.

The government is also struggling to consolidate its counterterrorism operations and fight against separatists' movements surging in Xinjiang and Tibet, which are believed to be supported by "subversive foreign forces". As Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang stated during a regular Foreign Ministry press briefing when asked about the NSC, "with the establishment of the National Security Council in China, terrorists are getting nervous, separatists are getting nervous and extremists are getting nervous." (Foreign Ministry of PRC, 2013)

## Time to intensify China's power projection globally

Third, **though divided, different CPC factions cannot openly oppose the idea that the government needs better information-sharing and coordination to react quickly to international security challenges, to advance China's interests overseas and to handle its territorial disputes.** In the recent past, the disconnect between the State Council (responsible for foreign policy) and the Party's Central Military Commission (CMC, in charge of security policy) has led to various embarrassments and inefficient responses to outside challenges. One example was given by a South China Sea report of the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2012): When the US-Navy Ship *Impeccable* was confronted by Chinese paramilitary and navy vessels on 8 March 2009, the Chinese foreign ministry was apparently not immediately informed and had to learn what had happened from Western interlocutors. The lack of coordination between government branches also creates a situation of relative disorder giving different branches the opportunity to compete for a bigger role in policy areas of overlapping responsibility. This situation of bureaucratic infighting has been forcing the hand of central leaders. These problems are even more pronounced when dealing with relatively new and particularly cross-cutting security issues like cybersecurity, energy security and protection of overseas Chinese.

Furthermore, as China's economic power grows, it starts to intensify its power projection. **China has become much more assertive in its territorial claims, partly to push back what it perceives as US "containment against China" in the Asia Pacific region in recent years. During the past two years, China has pursued a rather effective approach that the *People's Daily* termed "combination punches" (组合拳): firstly, using law enforcement units on the sea to assert its power but avoid military conflicts; secondly, using economic power to split up ASEAN countries' stances on territorial disputes with China.** (People's Daily online,

2012). Such “combined punches” also require a supervising body setting strategies and coordinating multiple relevant organs. It is an argument that faces very little opposition in the otherwise divided power structure, especially when regional countries including Japan and Australia have set up their own NSC in recent years. As former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell has observed, “There is a larger trend across Asia to bring deliberations and decision-making into presidential or ministerial offices in an effort to better respond to the rapidly changing security environment in Asia.” (Campbell, 2014)

### Will the NSC change “collective leadership”?

The “collective leadership” of the CPC was designed after Mao’s death by Deng Xiaoping and several senior leaders to prevent any single person from monopolizing the political power. It is thus difficult to imagine how the PSC, sharing parallel powers since the late 1970’s, would allow Xi to fully command an organ that is even more ambitious than Jiang Zemin’s failed plan. According to various reports and analyses, the NSC will possibly exert commanding power over the Public Security Ministry (the police), the armed police, legal system, the secret service, the PLA, the Foreign Ministry and the party’s propaganda office, etc.

The structure of the NSC follows the CPC’s standard procedure, restricting the new body to the collective leadership principle and making the chairman answer to the Politbureau. Its name was crowned with “Central Committee (中央)” (the Central Committee of the CPC) when it was established in January. **A document issued after the meeting stated that “the commission, which will answer to the Politbureau and its standing committee, will be the CPC Central Committee agency responsible for decision making, deliberation and coordination on national security work.”** (Xinhua, 2014)

So far, except the chairman (Xi Jinping) and Vice Chairmen (Li Keqiang and Zhang Dejiang), no other names inside this organ have been revealed and are obviously still under negotiations among the PSC members. **The role of the Chairman is not yet clearly defined. It is not yet clear how and whether the complex coordination will work more efficiently than the Central Small Leading Groups. A less ambitious initiative attempted by Xi to simplify the power structure, namely the integration of four different maritime law enforcement units under the China Coast Guard, has been stuck six months past the deadline set by Beijing.** (Kwok, 2014) The reasons include unclear policies and lack of resources for rearranging current employees, red tape and bureaucratic resistance to giving up current division of powers. The NSC’s future work would encounter even more challenges because it involves many more government branches and established interests.

### More institutional reforms to be done

Outside the party’s power centre, the establishment of a “Central Party’s NSC” has triggered multiple questions by legal experts and scholars in China. An expert on constitutional law, Professor Ma Ling from China Youth University for Political Science, raised that it is unsuitable for a party organ to use “national” as its name. **A “national” entity should be established under the State Council, and the establishment of such a permanent power structure would require a constitutional change.** To avoid the “Central Party’s NSC” overtaking the role of the government, which is to execute national policies, a governmental NSC should be established at least in name, and combined with the CPNSC. (Ma, 2014)

More optimistic analysts compare China’s NSC to the National Security Council of the United States or the Security Council of the Russian Federation. **Though many international observers tend to see China’s NSC as a copy of the US model, Chinese security experts tend to see China’s NSC as closer to the Russian institutional**

**setup.** This is because China's NSC is not designed to be only a consulting body, but to carry out multiple functions like decision-making and rule-making. It also covers a wider spectrum of issues than its US counterpart, including economic security, and features a more intense homeland security focus. These experts also believe that the NSC will not be granted the executive powers that replace the governmental organizations. (Xin, 2013, Hu/Wang, 2014)

### **What will Xi Jinping and the NSC bring to global security?**

If Xi fails to summon enough support, his NSC could be turned into a side-lined body that does not differ much from the sluggish National Security Leading Small Group. **If Xi successfully gathers sufficient support and power, he could move Chinese security policy to a bolder path towards asserting China's interests overseas and starting to reshape the existing security architecture without armed conflicts.**

### **More transparency and consistency?**

Some foreign analysts see positive aspects of the establishment of the NSC, foreseeing a **more coherent Chinese foreign policy**, and less confusion about future provocative offhand remarks by Chinese military officers, wondering whether they represent the official security policy. They see that China will increase its capacity to respond to fast-moving crises instead of leaving the other side involved in a security crisis or incident in the dark for days as in the case of 2009 USNS Impeccable incident. Overall, they expect China's NSC to bring **more transparency and consistency** to Chinese foreign policies because it will consolidate all the domestic actors involved under one clear policy line.

Such changes might or might not materialize, but they hardly constitute Xi's purpose of founding the NSC. When designing his political vision for China in the next decades, Xi repeatedly mentions his "China Dream": a "strong-nation dream of a great

revival of the Chinese people". That means first to secure domestic security and the CPC's rule and to unify the CPC's leadership.

### **Diverting from "Hide and Bide" policy**

The second part of the China dream might consist of **diverting from Deng Xiaoping's "Hide and Bide" policy – a policy that has kept China away from getting politically or militarily involved in international conflicts, and making neither allies nor enemies for about three decades. However, this policy has gradually been transformed in the past years, as China integrated deeply into the world economy and can no longer passively follow the "Hide and Bide" paradigm.** Nor can it strictly adhere to the "Non-Interference Principle" that used to help developing countries to fend off Cold War superpowers' intervention, as China finds itself increasingly involved in the domestic affairs of other countries that have strong economic links with China.

### **"Differentiate enemies from friends"**

Aiming at a more proactive foreign policy, **Xi Jinping defined his global strategy focusing on three areas in the coming years: a "New Silk Road" through Central Asia reaching Europe, a "Silk Road on Sea" reaching beyond the Arabian Sea and an "Economic Corridor" connecting India, Myanmar and Bangladesh.** These "silk roads" extend all the way into the Middle East and were warmly welcome by the Gulf Cooperation Council delegates during their January visit to Beijing. These far reaching grand picture strategies put even higher demands on China's security planning and cooperation. According to Yan Xuetong, a senior government advisor leading the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University, **China now has a stronger wish to gain the political support of neighbouring countries in order to secure China's economic, security and other interests. However, this clearly appears very difficult to achieve as China's is facing high mistrust and even animosity in the region due to its increasingly assertive behaviour in the**

### **maritime disputes with its neighbours.**

“Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China will start to differentiate enemies from friends. For those countries who are willing to play a constructive role in China’s rising, China would let them gain bigger real interests from its development.” said Yan after a debate with US scholar John Mearsheimer in November 2013 (Yan, 2014). This prediction portrays a China version of the Carrot and Stick policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will not only lure the countries involved into helping to consolidate China’s rise in global power structure, but also selectively punish those who undermine its rise, using economic, political and security levers. The definition of “national security” has also been expanded to include all aspects of China’s power, including China’s bargaining power in global natural resources markets, according to Chinese scholars and experts. (Xin, 2013, Hu/ Wang, 2014)

Besides the assertiveness in China’s South China Sea and East China Sea territorial disputes with the neighbouring countries, **there are growing signs that Xi Jinping is ready to take a more proactive security policy globally.** A small experiment was done in December 2013, when China signed an agreement with Ukraine, promising the latter “relevant security guarantees when Ukraine encounters an invasion involving nuclear weapons or Ukraine is under threat of a nuclear invasion”. (Xinhua, 2013) There were various interpretation and counter arguments from Chinese and international observers and experts on whether this statement invokes the traditional concept of a “nuclear umbrella” (Yu, Miles 2013, Yu, Ligong, 2013, He, 2013, Dill / Jay, 2014, Conroy, 2014). It is unlikely that China breaks its fundamental stance on Non-Proliferation Treaty. However, there is no explanation on why such a security guarantee as already included in China’s

statement to Ukraine in 1994 (Dill / Jay, 2014) needed to be reiterated at this sensitive point in time. Concluding that the agreement simply “states the obvious” does not provide a fully satisfactory answer. Ultimately, the diplomatic purpose that the reiteration of the security guarantee serves remains intriguingly ambiguous. *[An earlier version of this text cited the incorrect translation used by Yu, 2013; further explanation to reflect the state of the discussion has been added]*

The fast growing Chinese Navy recently conducted a drilling in the Indian Ocean for the first time, which is another proof of China’s readiness to act like a global power. (Sevastopulo/Clove, 2014) Yan also predicts that China will not only impose sanction on countries that are against China (which has happened to Japan and the Philippines in 2010 and 2012 due to territorial disputes, to Norway in 2010 after the Nobel Peace Prize was given to a Chinese dissident), but also isolate them internationally. If successful, the new NSC can become a powerful instrument to achieve these goals.

The 2014 National People’s Congress in early March will probably push the establishment of the NSC further and legitimize it as a dual party-state institution. If not, that would be a clear sign that the process is facing major political opposition and obstacles. However, with or without the NSC, the new paradigm of the “China Dream” will continue to shape and change the architecture of global security in the years to come.

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