

18 | HOW DOES CHINA THINK ABOUT NATIONAL SECURITY?

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PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA president Xi Jinping's approach to security—both domestic security and foreign security policy—has emerged as a defining feature of his leadership. Most commonly, when Chinese sources talk about these questions, they use the term “national security.” But what does China mean by that term? How does understanding it help us explain recent Chinese behavior both at home and abroad?

Signs emerged early in Xi's tenure that he planned to pursue a different direction for China's security policy. A brief mention appeared in November 2013 at the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress, but it became clearer in April 2014 when he presented something called the *zongti guojia anquanguan*, which Chinese sources translated as “comprehensive national security concept.” Another way to translate it would be as a “holistic state security concept.” This concept's debut occurred in tandem with the launch of the Central National Security Commission (CNSC), designed to oversee implementation of the new concept across the party-state.

In January 2015, the Politburo approved China's first-ever national security strategy. The strategy was not publicly released, but from official media summaries it appeared to reflect the principles outlined in Xi's earlier speeches. Commentators acknowledged at the time that it was “a new thing for China,” describing it as “an

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important theoretical innovation” and “a national security theory with Chinese characteristics.” The Politburo approved an update to this national security strategy in late 2021.

American analysts initially anticipated that the CNSC might look more like the US National Security Council, which focuses on foreign policy. That turned out to be wrong for several reasons. First, China’s conception of national security has a much more prominent role for internal security questions, and the center of gravity for national security work is explicitly internal. Therefore, most CNSC meetings have involved internal matters, such as Xinjiang and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese strategic thought has a long history of seeing internal and external security as interconnected, as indicated by the popular phrase *nei luan wai huan*, which can be translated as “internal disorder and external disaster,” with the implication that the former invites the latter. Most recent Chinese sources, however, differentiate Xi’s focus on internal, nontraditional, and emergent threats from past leaders’ primary focus on traditional external security questions. In the new strategy, external threats are refracted through the prism of how they will affect social stability and political security at home.

Beyond that, the framing of security is very broad. Xi’s original concept lists eleven types of security that fall under the comprehensive national security concept: political, territorial, military, economic, cultural, social, science and technological, information, ecological, financial, and nuclear. Other articles sometimes fit ideological security (described as a hybrid between political and cultural security) and health security into the framework. This breadth means that almost anything can be considered a security threat and addressed via the national security tools that China is developing.

At the most basic level, however, the goal of the new strategy is to preserve the leadership role of the Chinese Communist Party

(CCP) and of Xi himself. Chinese writings call political security the “foundation” of national security, and they define political security as “safeguard[ing] the party’s leadership, the socialist system, and the authority of the Central Committee with Xi Jinping as the core.” This is partly why some analysts argue that “state security” is a better translation than “national security,” because the core goal is really about regime protection. Even Chinese rhetoric sometimes translates the term *guojia* as “state” instead of “national”—for example, it’s the word that appears in the name of the Ministry of State Security, which handles political policing in China.

Threats to political security are not just material or threats of physical harm; they also involve threats of ideological contamination. Chinese scholars have written about “ideological security” and the need for mechanisms for early detection of threats it may face. This definition of threat dates back in part to the CCP’s attempts to analyze the fall of the Soviet Union; Xi Jinping appears to believe that corruption from within, a lack of ideological fidelity, and insufficient control over the coercive apparatus were among the principal factors that doomed Soviet communism.

The worldview reflected in this comprehensive national security concept is also one that pairs opportunities and threats in almost dialectical fashion. The phrase “changes in the world unseen in a century” appears frequently, especially since 2017, and indicates a pair of ideas: that China is indeed approaching the center of the world stage and that risks and difficulties become greater as the party-state nears its goal of national rejuvenation. Thus, it doesn’t make sense in China’s framing to speak only of increased opportunity abroad; that side of the concept is almost always paired with a corresponding increase in risk, uncertainty, instability, and danger.

The answer, according to the new security concept, is for China to become more proactive and preventive in its approach to all threats.

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Many of the dominant metaphors are medical: political threats are described as “viruses” and “tumors,” and senior leaders have spoken of the need to “immunize” the Chinese body politic against the kind of politically problematic thinking that leads to threatening or destabilizing behavior. As a result, China has moved away from the language of “stability maintenance” and toward a discourse centered on “prevention and control,” which addresses potential security risks to the CCP before they emerge. Official directives since 2015 have discussed the party-state’s goal of constructing a “multidimensional information-based prevention and control system for public-social security.”

This is not mere rhetoric. Adoption of the comprehensive national security concept and the new national security strategy and the enhanced focus on prevention and control of political security threats explain many steps China has taken since 2013—steps that might otherwise appear disconnected and unrelated.

To implement this strategy in a world where internal and external security threats are deeply interconnected, Xi has reorganized the military and domestic security forces (particularly the command structure of the People’s Armed Police) and consolidated and elevated the discipline and supervision apparatus to ensure tighter party control. Alongside the creation of the CNSC, these structural and organizational changes are explicitly justified by pointing to the inadequacy of China’s old bureaucratic structures to deal with today’s security environment.

The National People’s Congress has passed or amended almost twenty pieces of security legislation that give the party-state enhanced power to deal with both internal and external challenges. The Hong Kong National Security Law passed in the summer of 2020, which asserts significant extraterritorial authority over individuals and companies, is the latest of these, but others have tackled intelligence,

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counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and other cross-border and nontraditional threats.

Local and provincial budgets for domestic security spending have increased substantially; as media reports have noted, this spending has begun to exceed China's rapidly growing expenditures on the military and national defense. Much of the increase has been for surveillance technology and data integration tools to facilitate the aim of early warning and "prevention and control." These technologies have had not only a domestic impact but also a global one, as they had been exported to at least eighty countries as of 2019.

We saw many of these systems operating during the pandemic. "Prevention and control" has a dual discursive history in both public health and public security; it appears, for example, in the full name of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic depended a lot on the broader surveillance and security infrastructure that the CCP had already for social control. Tools such as grid management, which divides cities into grid areas and assigns teams to collect data to monitor them, were used to enforce lockdowns, as were big-data platforms that could be used for predictive and "intelligence-led" or "informatized" policing.

Xi's anticorruption campaigns, which have targeted the military and the political legal system in particular, appear aimed at defending political security by ensuring that corruption does not erode the CCP's "ruling foundation" or make its personnel vulnerable to bribery and compromise by outside intelligence agencies. The securitization of anticorruption campaigns, along with the idea that external developments can contribute to social instability at home, has also brought a noticeable increase in the pursuit of international cooperation by Chinese law enforcement.

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This new security approach has also produced significant changes in specific regions and policy issues most notably in Xinjiang, where the CCP has escalated a campaign of collective repression against the Uyghur Muslim population. One way to understand this escalation, which began in the spring of 2017, is to see it as motivated by not only domestic factors but also China's heightened sensitivity to the potential for small changes in the external environment to heighten the risk of internal destabilization, as the comprehensive national security strategy suggests. In this case, Chinese leaders appear to have focused on a perceived need to prevent terrorism from diffusing back into China via radicalized transnational Uyghur networks and links (however tenuous) to terrorist groups in Southeast Asia, Syria, and the broader Middle East. This is one variant of the internal-external security nexus that Xi's comprehensive concept called on officials to scrutinize. When combined with the preventive logic of "immunization," it has produced the sharp escalation in collective repression and grossly disproportionate violations of civil, political, and other human rights that the world has witnessed in Xinjiang.

In sum, the Chinese approach to "national security" has changed under Xi with the introduction of his comprehensive national security concept. Unlike the United States, where national security is external and homeland security deals with internal questions, China's concept includes both and gives a prominent role to internal threats and destabilizing forces. The new strategy calls on China to become more active in preventing threats from emerging at all, which in turn can explain much of its recent more proactive—and more repressive—behavior at home and abroad.

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