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ZACHARY BURDETTE, SHANSHAN MEI, ELIZABETH BUJWID, IAN BURNS MCCASLIN, LIBBY WEAVER, NATHAN BEAUCHAMP-MUSTAFAGA, KRISTEN GUNNESS

Understanding China's National Security Decisionmaking

A Primer for U.S. Policymakers

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About This Paper

What factors shape how the People's Republic of China makes national security decisions during crises or conflicts? This paper presents a building block framework that identifies three universal elements that shape how governments make policy decisions—information, analysis, and authorities. We map this framework onto China's national security decisionmaking ecosystem, drawing on historical examples to illustrate recurring dynamics. These building blocks cue U.S. policymakers to think about what China's decisionmakers are likely to know, how China's decisionmakers will interpret the information available to them, and who within the Chinese system makes which decisions. We identify recurring patterns in China's decisionmaking, such as problems with lower-level actors inside the Chinese system failing to send bad news up the chain of command; a tendency to interpret new information through a worst-case lens that reflects chronic distrust of the United States; and that China's decisionmaking is often centralized but not always to the extreme extent that some U.S. commentators assume, all of which can lead to decisions or actions that seemingly run counter to what outside observers might expect.

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Understanding China's National Security Decisionmaking

In October 2020, Chinese officials became deeply concerned that the U.S. military might provoke a war in the South China Sea as part of an "October Surprise" to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential election the following month.[2] The origins of these fears seem to have come from an odd mixture of sources ranging from distorted understandings of how U.S. domestic politics worked to misinterpreting the meaning of a U.S. Air Force unit's new patch that had an MQ-9 Reaper superimposed over a map of China.[3] Although these concerns about a U.S. military attack had no basis in reality, the extent of China's fears became so strong that then–Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley directly reached out to his Chinese counterpart to reassure him that the United States was not planning an attack.[4] China's fears even became pervasive enough that the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) Ministry of National Defense (MND) revealed publicly that U.S. officials had provided some assurances.[5]

The events of October 2020 underscore the difficulty and importance of understanding the PRC's national security decisionmaking. Some of the most consequential foreign policy outcomes of the 21st century will depend partly on what decisions China makes, including choices about the use of military force in its territorial disputes with U.S. allies and partners, the pace and scope of its nuclear buildup, and participation in negotiations to address such pressing transnational challenges as artificial intelligence and global public health. From the U.S. perspective, a deeper understanding of the PRC's decisionmaking enables more-effective competition and helps foster greater stability in the U.S.-China relationship. However, understanding China's decisionmaking can be challenging. The United States has frequently encountered difficulties in the past in predicting PRC decisions, such as failing to anticipate Mao Zedong's decision to intervene in the Korean War in 1950 and the 2020 October Surprise crisis described above.[6] Without *strategic empathy*—understanding a rival's perspectives, motivations, and constraints to inform and improve one's own decisionmaking—it is much harder to anticipate a competitor's actions and to identify opportunities to influence its decisions.

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[2] Mark Milley, "General Milley's Engagements with the People's Liberation Army Leadership," memorandum for record, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 27, 2021.

[3] Rachel Cohen, "With an Eye on China, Reaper Drones Train for Maritime War," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, September 24, 2020.

[4] The U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China, Chad Sbragia, also contacted his counterpart in the Chinese military on October 20, 2020, via video teleconference (Milley, 2021).

[5] MND, "The U.S. Secretary of Defense Clarified the So-Called 'October Surprise' Rumors Through Military Diplomatic Channels" ["国防部：美防长通过军事外交渠道澄清所谓'十月惊奇'传言"], People's Republic of China, October 29, 2020.

[6] Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War*, Stanford University Press, 1993.

This paper provides a primer for U.S. policymakers on China's national security decisionmaking.[7] It starts from the premise that there are universal features that shape how all governments make decisions. We apply this framework to the Chinese decisionmaking system to systematically identify its key characteristics.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we outline a building block framework that identifies three universal elements that shape how governments make decisions. The three building blocks—information, analysis, and authorities—capture what decisionmakers know, how they think about what they know, and who decides what. Second, we apply these building blocks to the Chinese decisionmaking ecosystem. Third, we summarize key patterns and trends. Finally, we conclude with final thoughts and policy implications.

A Framework for Understanding Decisionmaking

All government decisionmaking shares certain universal features. We refer to these foundational elements as *building blocks*. We break down the decisionmaking process into three component parts: *information*, *analysis*, and *authorities*. These building blocks highlight key questions about the decisionmaking process: *who knows what*, *how do they think about what they know*, and *who decides what?* The goal in answering these questions is to understand the central features of a government's overall decisionmaking ecosystem rather than to forecast specific decisions. Predicting a specific human decision is notoriously difficult, so it is more useful to focus on identifying recurring patterns of behavior.[8] Recognizing these patterns can help narrow down what kinds of decisions are more or less likely. Our goal is equivalent to identifying recurring atmospheric patterns rather than to forecasting the weather on a particular day.

Starting with a universal framework is useful because it can orient policymakers to what constellations of factors in the Chinese system they should look at in the first place.[9] This can point to the questions we need to answer to understand China's key decisionmaking patterns.[10] The framework

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[7] By *national security*, we mean the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) efforts to secure itself against threats to its political sovereignty and territorial integrity. The threats, from the CCP's perspective, may originate from both external and internal sources. Unlike the United States and other Western democracies, the CCP treats state security and regime security as inseparable components within Xi Jinping's "overall national security outlook [总体国家安全观]." Although this paper focuses primarily on China's outward-looking national security decisions, it also considers inward-facing decisions, such as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) policies and disaster relief responses to the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, as a source of insights (see "China Releases White Paper on National Security," Xinhua, May 12, 2025. For the full text in Chinese, see State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China [中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室], *China's National Security in the New Era* [新时代的中国国家安全], Xinhua, May 12, 2025; and "Xi Calls for Overall National Security Outlook," Xinhua, February 17, 2017). By *decisionmaking*, we mean "the process by which actors choose between competing alternatives" (see Tyler Jost, "Chinese Foreign Policy Decisionmaking: A Review of the Literature," in Scott W. Harold, Tyler Jost, Wendy Leutert, and Agnes Xiangzhen Wang, *Understanding China's Politics, Policies, and Society: Papers Presented at a RAND Corporation Conference on China Research*, RAND Corporation, CF-A3996-1, 2025).

[8] Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction*, Crown Publishers, 2015.

[9] Having a standardized framework also provides a yardstick for making comparisons across time.

[10] For past work on Chinese foreign policy decisionmaking, see, for example, A. Doak Barnett, T*he Making of Foreign Policy in China: Structure and Process*, Westview Press, 1985; Kenneth G. Lieberthal and David M. Lampton, eds., *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, University of California Press, 1996; Lu Ning, *The Dynamics of Foreign-Policy Decisionmaking in China*, Westview Press, 1997; David Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era*

identifies three foundational building blocks of government decisionmaking. Table 1 provides an overview of these building blocks, outlines recurring ways in which they can distort decisionmaking, and provides an example of each dynamic.

The first building block is **information**. The informational picture that policymakers have about their environment and their policy options is critical in their decisionmaking. To understand how a government makes decisions, we need to know what the informational picture available to its leaders looks like. This paper focuses on two types of informational distortions: *incomplete* information, when decisionmakers lack key facts,[11] and *inaccurate* information, when decisionmakers receive bad data.[12] Sometimes these challenges arrive from inadvertent errors, such as failures to collect timely intelligence or failures of siloed institutions to share information well. But we also identify *politicization*, which is when lower-level actors withhold or falsify information because of political pressures, as an important driver of both incomplete and inaccurate information. Those political pressures could include either fears of retaliation for perceived poor performance or sharing unpleasant news or the desire for rewards from reporting news that leaders want to hear and creating the perception of good performance.

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of Reform, Stanford University Press, 2001a; Huiyun Feng, *Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Confucianism, Leadership and War*, Routledge, 2007; Bonnie Glaser and Evan Medeiros, "The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of 'Peaceful Rise,'" Vol. 190, *China Quarterly*, 2007; Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2010; Yun Sun, *Chinese National Security Decision-Making: Processes and Challenges*, Brookings Institution, May 2013; Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds., *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking*, Stanford University Press, 2015; Linda Jakobson and Ryan Manuel, "How Are Foreign Policy Decisions Made in China?" *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2016; Alastair Iain Johnston, "The Evolution of Interstate Security Crisis-Management Theory and Practice in China," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 69, No. 1, 2016; Audrye Wong, "More Than Peripheral: How Provinces Influence China's Foreign Policy," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 235, 2018; Suisheng Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*, Stanford University Press, 2022; Roy D. Kamphausen, ed., *China's Military Decision-Making in Times of Crisis and Conflict*, National Bureau of Asian Research, 2023; Tyler Jost, "The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation in China's International Crises," *International Security*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2023b; Tyler Jost, *Bureaucracies at War: The Institutional Origins of Miscalculation*, Cambridge University Press, 2024; Jacob Stokes, *Beyond China's Black Box: Five Trends Shaping Beijing's Foreign and Security Policy Decision-Making Under Xi Jinping*, Center for a New American Security, April 2024.

[11] Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, Cornell University Press, 2010.

[12] Jost, 2023b; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1976. In addition to decisionmakers receiving incomplete and inaccurate information streams, they may also be overwhelmed by an excessive amount of information, making it difficult to keep up and process the data intelligently. This information overload can further hinder effective decisionmaking, even when some accurate data are available.

Table 1. Overview of Universal Decisionmaking Framework

Building Block	Challenge	Logic	Example
Information	Incomplete	Decisionmakers have large or critical gaps in situational awareness.	1941 Pearl Harbor: Fragmented and siloed intelligence prevented effective warning of Japanese attack.
	Inaccurate	Decisionmakers have wrong information.	2022 Russia: President Vladimir Putin received distorted assessments of prospects against Ukraine.
Analysis	Cognitive bias	Human psychology often causes deviations from scientifically rational decisionmaking.	1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: U.S. leaders assumed that Soviet missile deployments reflect aggressive motives and failed to fully consider alternative explanations (fundamental attribution error).
	Organizational influences	Organizational politics and procedures can push decisionmakers toward certain courses of action because they are routine or advance the organization's interests, even if they are not ideal for the problem at hand.	1960s Vietnam: The U.S. Army struggled to deviate from conventional warfighting doctrine.
	Emotional influences	Human emotions, such as fear or anger, make certain responses systematically more likely.	1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: PRC leaders feared a Soviet nuclear first strike and evacuated Beijing (fear triggers fight-or-flight reaction).
Authorities	Formal	Decisions follow official lines as reflected on a formal organizational chart.	1991 Gulf War: Decisionmaking was carefully managed along formal lines of authority.
	Informal	Decisions follow tacit lines of authority, rerouting decisionmaking.	1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: President John F. Kennedy established the Executive Committee of the National Security Council as a temporary alternative to the normal decisionmaking process.
	Unauthorized	Lower-level actors sometimes take unauthorized actions that defy the authorized decisionmaker's wishes.	1931 Mukden Incident: Mid-level officers of the Japanese Kwantung Army launched an unauthorized false-flag attack and conquest of large parts of Manchuria.

NOTE: Because these challenges are not mutually exclusive, the historical examples in this table sometimes feature multiple decisionmaking distortions (e.g., both inaccurate information and unauthorized initiative).

The second building block is **analysis**. This term refers to the systematic ways in which decisionmakers process and interpret information, which can result in potentially divergent conclusions even when presented with identical data. One source of distortions in the analytic process comes from *cognitive biases*, which are systematic deviations from scientifically rational judgment,

arising from mental heuristics, such as confirmation bias.[13] *Organizational influences* are another source of distortion. These influences reflect how institutional interests and norms (e.g., bureaucratic politics or ideology) can predispose policymakers to view problems through a certain lens that aligns with standard operating procedures or parochial priorities.[14] The term *emotional influences* captures the impact of specific feelings and affective states (e.g., shame and fear) on judgment.[15]

The third building block is **authorities**. By *authorities*, we mean the power to decide. Authorities matter because no single leader can make every decision in every scenario. Understanding how another government will make decisions therefore requires understanding which actors are responsible for which kinds of decisions. In theory, governments make decisions based on *formal authorities*, which reflect decisions following the official lines of authority as reflected on an organizational chart. We identify two other variations: *informal authorities*, which are how decisions circumvent what a formal organizational chart would suggest on paper and instead follow tacit lines of authority; and *unauthorized initiative*, which reflects that lower-level actors sometimes make decisions without proper authorization, either in ways that defy the wishes of the authorized decisionmakers or because they have received ambiguous or conflicting instructions from their superiors.

The following sections map this framework onto China's national security decisionmaking. We leverage the framework to identify key characteristics of the Chinese system, and we draw on historical examples to illustrate how China's national security decisionmaking has worked in the past.[16] An important caveat is that China's decisionmaking process is opaque, and there is significant variation in how much public information is available for each building block. The opacity motivates this paper—to provide a primer for U.S. policymakers and analysts on a competitor that can be especially difficult to understand and thereby reduce their blind spots. But it is also important for U.S. policymakers to recognize that there are inherent limitations on how confidently one can observe and understand the Chinese system from the outside. Therefore, we flag areas in China's system in which there is especially strong uncertainty so that U.S. policymakers gain an appropriate sense of the aspects of China's decisionmaking ecosystem of which U.S. analysts have a stronger or weaker understanding.

Although this study focused on the limitations and distortions of China's decisionmaking system, the system also has notable strengths. These strengths include policy coordination and execution, long-term strategic planning, and an increasingly professional military.[17] This system's elite cohesion, institutional stability, and ability to concentrate resources on national priorities further contribute to its resilience and effectiveness. However, we focus on challenges and flaws in China's national security

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[13] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science*, Vol. 185, No. 4157, 1974; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

[14] Graham Allison and Philip D. Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 2nd ed., Longman, 1999.

[15] Rose McDermott, "Emotions in Foreign Policy Decision Making," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2017.

[16] We used the following criteria for selecting these historical vignettes: their relevance to China's national security (as opposed to, for example, decisions about economic policies or social safety nets); their significance in that they were sufficiently consequential national security decisions similar to the kinds of issues that might arise in future crises rather than in day-to-day foreign policy decisionmaking; their generalizability in that the historical example still sheds light on features of Chinese decisionmaking that remain relevant today; and the availability of sufficient data to speak to the decisionmaking dynamics at play.

[17] Examples of its strengths in policy coordination and execution include China's domestic initiatives to reduce poverty and expand its infrastructure. Examples of long-term planning include sector strategies that have contributed to striking advances in such areas as renewable energy and robotics. Examples of its increasingly professional military include more realistic training and greater proficiency in joint operations.

decisionmaking system because these distortions are especially likely to lead to decisions that are harder for the United States to anticipate and that could contribute to breakdowns in effective communication and mutual understanding during crises.

Building Block 1: China's Informational Picture

The informational picture available to any given leader is critical to shaping decisions. Leaders are almost always operating with limited and imperfect information, but there are different types of informational shortcomings that might occur. As outlined above, we identify two ways in which distorted information streams can systematically impair decisionmaking: *incomplete* and *inaccurate* information streams. These categories are not mutually exclusive. But it is useful to distinguish situations in which decisionmakers consistently lack important information and those in which they consistently receive false information. Alongside explanations for informational failures that include fragmented and siloed institutions, we also identify *politicization* as a key driver that can make senior decisionmakers more likely to receive incomplete and inaccurate information.[18] The extent of these problems exists on a spectrum ranging from moderate to severe.

Although it is particularly difficult to make confident judgments about the informational picture available to China's decisionmakers (no government wants to provide too much transparency about the quality of its intelligence collection and analysis), it is nevertheless still possible to make some high-level observations about how information flows in the PRC system.

What information reaches top PRC decisionmakers depends partly on whose hands it passes through on its way up the chain of command. The PRC has many different organizations that collect, analyze, and share national security information. The three pillars of the PRC—the CCP, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and the State Council (China's civilian government)—maintain their own distinct channels for managing information. These pillars are not coequal because the PLA and the State Council are both subordinate to the CCP, but the PLA and the State Council are nevertheless distinct institutions within the PRC's ecosystem, and information is not always seamlessly shared across these institutions. Table 2 provides an overview of the key entities involved in providing information to China's national security decisionmakers.

[18] On the impact of institutional design on information flows, see Jost, 2023b; and Jost, 2024.

Table 2. Select Key Organizations Involved in Chinese Leadership Information Flows

Key Entity	Primary Function	Possible Role in National Security Decisionmaking
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Diplomatic reporting, analysis, and policy recommendations	Provides diplomatic cables, situation reports, and policy advice to top leaders
Ministry of State Security	Foreign intelligence collection, counterintelligence, and analysis	Supplies classified intelligence and threat assessments to senior leadership
PLA military intelligence	Military intelligence, foreign military analysis, and strategic assessments	Informs Central Military Commission (CMC) and top leaders on military and security issues
State-affiliated think tanks (e.g., China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, China Institute of International Studies)	Policy research, open-source analysis, and expert recommendations	Produces research reports and policy briefs for decisionmakers
Official media and internal reference publications (*neican*)	Curated news, open-source intelligence, and internal analysis	Provides synthesized and sometimes classified information to leaders
Central Committee and General Office of the State Council	Information management, coordination, and synthesis	Filters and organizes information flows to the Politburo and top leadership

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Mattis and Brazil, 2019.
NOTE: Other relevant organizations include the Ministry of Public Security, CCP International Department, CCP United Front Work Department, and provincial and local governments.

China relies on a patchwork of different agencies to collect and analyze foreign intelligence, just as many other countries with large national security bureaucracies do. Unlike the United States, which has a dominant foreign intelligence agency in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) is its chief foreign intelligence service but also handles domestic security, making it closer to the KGB than the CIA.[19] Even when the MSS operates overseas, rather than focusing only on traditional foreign intelligence, the MSS also monitors dissidents and ethnic minorities, and it supports overseas economic espionage.[20] In addition to the MSS, the PLA is a particularly influential actor within the Chinese intelligence community, focusing primarily on foreign intelligence related to military affairs. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has its own intelligence

[19] Peter Mattis and Matthew Brazil, *Chinese Communist Espionage: An Intelligence Primer*, Naval Institute Press, 2019.

[20] Joe Leahy, "China's Feared Spy Agency Steps Out of the Shadows," *Financial Times*, January 22, 2024; Edward Wong, Julian E. Barnes, Muyi Xiao, and Chris Buckley, "Chinese Spy Agency Rising to Challenge the C.I.A.," *New York Times*, December 27, 2023; William C. Hannas, James Mulvenon, and Anna B. Puglisi, *Chinese Industrial Espionage: Technology Acquisition and Military Modernisation*, Taylor and Francis, 2013.

process for diplomatic reporting and analysis that exists outside the Chinese intelligence community's other channels, but the MFA's influence on foreign policy decisionmaking has declined over time.[21]

Beyond the intelligence community, the CCP also has an internal reporting system known as *neican* (内参). This is a secret channel for information deemed too sensitive for public release, such as local protests, corruption scandals, or contentious policy debates.[22] The information that goes through this channel might come from CCP authorities, but it can also come from such back channels as Chinese journalists and academics.[23] The *neican* system is tiered in that central leaders and mid-level cadres might receive different reports.

Finally, the number of Chinese think tanks is growing, but few have sufficient sway to reliably get information to China's senior leadership.[24] The China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, which is a government think tank under the MSS, is an exception that has much more influence than its peers.[25]

Chinese leaders theoretically have access to more information and a wider variety of sources than ever before. But, as for many countries, having a wide variety of organizations that collect and analyze information does not mean these sources necessarily reach senior decisionmakers or their staffs.

This patchwork of agencies and institutions creates redundancy by providing Chinese leaders with multiple sources of information and analysis. But the disadvantages are that senior leaders could potentially face greater uncertainty from conflicting assessments and that bureaucratic overlap could create inefficiencies and infighting. Another challenge is the stovepiping of information. This occurs when the dominance of vertical reporting (where subcentral units report up to the central level) in such agencies as the MSS leads to information becoming siloed within these agencies rather than shared fluidly across them. This stovepiping can impede comprehensive assessment and interagency collaboration in China, just as it does in other countries.[26] China's equivalent of the U.S. National Security Council has much less power than its U.S. counterpart to centralize and manage China's national security bureaucracy, meaning that it has less ability to manage interagency coordination and

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[21] Ning, 1997; Suisheng Zhao, "Top-Level Design and Enlarged Diplomacy: Foreign and Security Policymaking in Xi Jinping's China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 32, No. 139, 2023; Qingmin Zhang and Lize Yang, "Withering Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Evidence from China," in Paul Webster Hare, Juan Luis Manfredi-Sánchez, and Kenneth Weisbrode, eds., *Palgrave Handbook of Diplomatic Reform and Innovation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

[22] Wen-Hsuan Tsai, "A Unique Pattern of Policymaking in China's Authoritarian Regime: The CCP's Neican/Pishi Model," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 55, No. 6, November–December 2015.

[23] Tsai, 2015; Dake Kang, "In Xi's China, Even Internal Reports Fall Prey to Censorship," Associated Press, October 31, 2022. By being invited to brief Politburo study sessions, Chinese academics have become part of the information ecosystem that shapes senior leaders' understanding of key issues. Neil Thomas and Feifei Hung, *Who Briefs Xi Jinping? How Politburo Study Sessions Help to Decode Chinese Politics*, Center for China Analysis, October 23, 2024.

[24] Cheng Li, *The Power of Ideas: The Rising Influence of Thinkers and Think Tanks in China*, Brookings Institution, 2017.

[25] By contrast, the MFA has the China Institute of International Studies, which tends to have limited influence beyond the MFA, despite being a very active producer of research. Bonnie S. Glaser and Phillip C. Saunders, "Chinese Civilian Foreign Policy Research Institutes: Evolving Roles and Increasing Influence," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 171, 2002.

[26] Jost, 2023b, pp. 54–55; Minxin Pei, "Piercing the Veil of Secrecy: The Surveillance Role of China's MSS and MPS," *China Leadership Monitor*, February 2024; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Counter-Espionage and State Security: The Changing Role of China's Ministry of State Security," *China Leadership Monitor*, February 2025.

reduce stovepiping.[27] Instead, the General Office of the State Council and CCP Politburo's General Office of the Chinese Communist Party (Central Committee) manage much of this information flow.

The following two sections discuss how weaknesses in the Chinese systems can lead to information streams that are incomplete, inaccurate, or both.

Incomplete Information

Incomplete information streams occur when decisionmakers have large or critical gaps in their situational awareness because they are missing important information. This can occur when governments fail to collect and process raw intelligence effectively in the first place or because information remains siloed and poorly shared across the government.[28] Examples include the U.S. intelligences failures at Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the 9/11 attacks.[29] In both these examples, the U.S. government had important pieces of intelligence but failed to integrate them, identify the key implications, and share that information with the relevant decisionmakers. Similarly, information might exist in the Chinese system, but if China's senior leaders do not have access to that information when deciding, they are operating with incomplete information.[30]

Historically, Chinese decisionmakers have had significant gaps in situational awareness during past crises and even during more-routine diplomatic exchanges. We draw on two examples to illustrate challenges with incomplete information: the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the 2011 J-20 flight test during then–U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates's visit to Beijing.

In the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, China conducted unprecedented military exercises and missile tests near Taiwan to deter perceived moves by Taipei toward independence. The trigger for the crisis was then–Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui visiting the United States to give a speech at his alma mater, Cornell University, after the Clinton administration previously communicated that it would not issue a visa to Lee.[31] Beijing viewed Lee's visit as a violation of the U.S. "One China" policy.[32] When Chinese leaders initiated the military exercises and tests, they miscalculated, believing that Washington would avoid a direct military response.[33] Instead, the United States deployed two

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[27] Joel Wuthnow, *Transforming China's National Security Architecture in the Xi Era: Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on CCP-Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, January 27, 2022.

[28] Put differently, incomplete information is an outcome, and there can be various causes. The ways information flows through a government, such as how information is compiled into intelligence products or distributed through the interagency process, are all inputs that matter to the framework only insofar as they cause problems with incomplete or inaccurate information flows to the decisionmaker of interest.

[29] Ian Toll, *Pacific Crucible: War at Sea in the Pacific, 1941–1942*, W. W. Norton and Company, 2012; Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, Knopf, 2006.

[30] Put differently, incomplete information is from the perspective of the leaders making the decision. The perspective is not about whether information exists in the government, which does not guarantee that key actors have it.

[31] Alexandra T. Evans, Emily Ellinger, Jacob L. Heim, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Zachary Burdette, and Lydia Grek, *Managing Escalation: Lessons and Challenges from Three Historical Crises Between Nuclear-Armed Powers*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1743-2, 2024.

[32] Kristen Gunness and Phillip Saunders, *Averting Escalation and Avoiding War: Lessons from the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis*, National Defense University Press, China Strategic Perspectives No. 17, December 2022.

[33] Robert Ross, "The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Fall 2000.

aircraft carriers as a signal of strong commitment to Taiwan.[34] China appears to have faced two major informational failures during the crisis (though, again, there is particularly strong uncertainty about what China did and did not know in real time).

The first informational failure was that China's leaders likely lacked access to reliable information about the Clinton administration's policy deliberation process and underestimated the political pressure from the U.S. Congress for a stronger response.[35] China may have focused on the executive branch in isolation without collecting information about the extent of pressure from the U.S. Congress, which had previously compelled the Clinton administration to reverse its initial position to deny President Lee a visa.[36] President Bill Clinton had relented after a unanimous vote in the U.S. House of Representatives and a near-unanimous vote in the U.S. Senate to allow Lee's visit. The executive branch's previous effort to block Lee's visit and subsequent assurances from senior U.S. officials to Beijing may have reduced Chinese expectations of a strong military response, while missing the fact that Congress might again apply pressure. It is difficult to know, however, the extent to which incomplete information might have been the culprit versus other factors, such as Chinese leaders prioritizing assurances from the U.S. executive branch even if they were aware of sentiment in Congress. PRC leaders may have been aware of U.S. congressional pressure but discounted that information because of analytic biases, such as mirror-imaging, failing to understand Congress' significance because China lacks an equivalent division of power within its government. We discuss this dynamic at greater length below.

The second major informational failure during the Taiwan Strait Crisis was that the U.S. carrier deployment caught China off guard. This suggests major flaws in China's intelligence and assessment because of the PLA's inability to detect the carrier deployment.[37] Put simply, China at the time literally lacked the sensing capabilities needed to detect and track what was happening in the Pacific, though it has since addressed this shortcoming.[38] This is an instance in which China's ability to collect and analyze information has improved over time, reflecting efforts to address its own weaknesses and limitations. Because China is working to correct its past mistakes, failures in past crises may not always repeat in the same ways.

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[34] Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958*, Princeton University Press, 1996; John W. Garver, *Face Off: China, the United States, and Taiwan's Democratization*, University of Washington Press, 1997.

[35] China's officials may have also underestimated President Bill Clinton's resolve (see Ross, 2000).

[36] In 1995, Secretary of State Warren Christopher assured Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen that Lee would not be able to visit, and President Bill Clinton wrote a personal letter to Jiang Zemin reiterating U.S. commitment to the One China policy after the administration gave a visa to Lee. You Ji, "Making Sense of War Games in the Taiwan Strait," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 6, No. 15, 1997; Kai He, *China's Crisis Behavior: Political Survival and Foreign Policy After the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 61; David M. Lampton, *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing U.S.-China Relations, 1989–2000*, University of California Press, 2001b, p. 50.

[37] Eric McVadon, "PRC Exercises, Doctrine and Tactics Toward Taiwan: The Naval Dimension," in James R. Lilley and Chuck Downs, eds., *Crisis in the Taiwan Strait*, National Defense University Press, 1997, p. 270.

[38] Jonathan D. Caverley, "So What? Reassessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Summer 2025.

Turning to the J-20 case, China conducted the first test flight of its new stealth fighter jet in 2011 during then–Defense Secretary Gates's visit to Beijing.[39] Then–Chinese President Hu Jintao claimed that the timing was coincidental.[40] Gates told reporters at the time that China's "civilian leadership seemed surprised by the test."[41] Although Hu maintained that the test had been pre-planned and unrelated to Secretary Gates's visit, U.S. officials perceived the timing as intentional, interpreting it as a targeted message and demonstration of China's growing military capabilities. However, the Chinese explanation is credible because China's defense industry operates largely independently from the PLA and MFA, making it plausible that the test schedule was set without regard to diplomatic events.[42] This organizational separation can result in actions that appear politically motivated but are actually the product of unrelated factors that the top CCP leadership does not normally monitor and control. This is a case in which all the relevant information existed inside the PRC system, but it appears that institutional failures to share the right information with the right decisionmakers left Hu caught off guard. From the perspective of the Chinese defense industry, it might not have seemed like an informational failure because that was simply how information was normally managed at the time. But from the perspective of China's senior leaders, they had key gaps in their situational awareness during an important diplomatic engagement.

As these cases illustrate, incomplete information streams can have consequential impacts on U.S.-China interactions, including during crises or conflicts. If Chinese decisionmakers have lacked timely intelligence about U.S. actions or communications in the past, this will likely be a challenge again for these decisionmakers in the future. The same problem could occur in reverse, with U.S. decisionmakers potentially facing challenges with incomplete information. For example, China might stage military drills or exercises in an effort to send messages to U.S. audiences, but some aspects of its intended message may be lost in translation either because key information did not make it to the intended U.S. audience or because of analytical failures to interpret the message correctly, which we discuss below.[43] Poor information-sharing within the PRC or U.S. systems can also result in uncoordinated actions, such as surprise missile tests or unauthorized patrols, catching both sides and their regional partners off guard and complicating crisis management.

Inaccurate Information

Inaccurate information streams occur when senior decisionmakers receive false information. For example, Russian leader Vladimir Putin reportedly received outlandish intelligence assessments before

[39] Andrew Scobell, "The J-20 Episode and Civil-Military Relations in China," testimony submitted to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, RAND Corporation, CT-357, March 10, 2011; "China Conducts First Test-Flight of Stealth Plane," BBC, January 11, 2011.

[40] "China Conducts First Test-Flight of Stealth Plane," 2011.

[41] Elisabeth Bumiller and Michael Wines, "Test of Stealth Fighter Clouds Gates Visit to China," *New York Times*, January 11, 2011.

[42] For some analysis on this, see Scobell, 2011.

[43] Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Derek Grossman, Kristen Gunness, Michael S. Chase, Marigold Black, and Natalia D. Simmons-Thomas, *Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signalling in the New Era: An Analytic Framework and Seven Case Studies*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1074-1, 2021.

the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[44] Even perfectly rational decisionmakers will make counterproductive or unpredictable decisions that do not advance their intended goals if they are relying on inaccurate information. Such decisions can occur inadvertently when lower-level actors intend to provide accurate information to decisionmakers but instead present incorrect judgments as fact or significantly overstate their level of certainty about key judgments and thereby pollute the information environment.[45] But inaccuracy can also occur deliberately because of politicization, when lower-level actors knowingly pass incorrect information up the chain of command for political reasons, such as fear of punishment from sharing bad news or the desire for rewards if they deliver good news.

Inaccurate and politicized information streams are a recurring feature of China's political system. The PRC system regularly prioritizes secrecy over the free flow of information, suppressing accurate statistics on issues ranging from the economy to public health depending on the incentives of local officials and concerns about the CCP's image at home or abroad.[46] Sometimes it distorts only public-facing statistics, but, at other times, officials may also mislead their superiors privately if they believe there are strong incentives to do so. Politicized information streams have deep roots in CCP history; during the Great Leap Forward in China from 1958 to 1962, for example, local cadres notoriously gave the central government dishonest estimates of crop yields.[47] The extent of this challenge has varied over time, but Xi Jinping's rule has once again made the problem more pronounced.[48] Xi's consolidation of personal authority and repressive political purges have inspired fear and caution among party officials, incentivizing them to behave in ways that minimize the risk of attracting scrutiny and becoming targets of political reprisals.[49] This pressure to provide good news and cater to the CCP's preferred political narratives can compromise the objectivity and accuracy of information streams, with mid-level officials constrained in the guidance they can provide to subordinates, and lower-level actors facing incentives to misrepresent realities on the ground. As a result, China's senior leaders may receive incomplete or selectively framed information about sensitive situations. This is particularly applicable to foreign policy crises, which unfold rapidly and make reliable information more difficult to acquire in a timely manner.

Because of these dynamics, some analysts believe that China faces an echo chamber on certain issues in which subordinates are reluctant to challenge Xi or provide bad news.[50] Although there is

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[44] Adam E. Casey and Seva Gunitsky, "The Bully in the Bubble: Putin and the Perils of Information Isolation," *Foreign Affairs*, February 4, 2022.

[45] Jeffrey Friedman, "The World Is More Uncertain Than You Think: Assessing and Combating Overconfidence Among 2,000 National Security Officials," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2025.

[46] See, for example, Rebecca Feng and Jason Douglas, "How Bad Is China's Economy? The Data Needed to Answer Is Vanishing," *Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 2025.

[47] Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Politics of China*, 3rd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2011.

[48] Vincent Brussee and Kai von Carnap, *The Increasing Challenge of Obtaining Information from Xi's China*, Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2024.

[49] Chun Han Wong, "Xi Tells Officials Scared of Being Purged: It's OK to Make Mistakes," *Wall Street Journal*, January 19, 2025.

[50] Kang, 2022; Tong Zhao, "How China's Echo Chamber Threatens Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, May 9, 2023; Shannon Tiezzi, "David Shambaugh on China's Political Personalities, from Mao to Xi," *The Diplomat*, September 8, 2021; Cai Xia, "The Weakness of Xi Jinping: How Hubris and Paranoia Threaten China's Future," *Foreign Affairs*, September 6, 2022; Tyler Jost, "The Bad Advice Plaguing Beijing's Foreign Policy: How China's Bureaucracy Guides Its Leaders into Error," *Foreign Affairs*, April 27, 2023a.

limited direct evidence on how Xi and other top Chinese leaders account for information distortion or bureaucratic filtering, it is plausible that they are aware of these long-standing challenges within the system, and there is evidence that efforts were made to address this challenge in the economic realm under Hu Jintao when he was China's leader.[51] One example is that a former senior official, Li Keqiang, distrusted official economic growth statistics, so he claimed to develop his own statistics, known as the Li Keqiang Index, based on other official numbers that he said were less likely to be manipulated.[52] More recently, Xi has reportedly tried to assuage concerns among subordinates that mistakes would result in political persecution, potentially out of concern that such fears were incentivizing dishonesty.[53]

Reluctance to share unpleasant or embarrassing information with senior leaders does not mean that senior leaders *never* receive bad news. China's leaders are aware of the country's problems, and they have made policy changes when existing approaches were failing, such as the end of the Zero Covid policy in 2022. But it may take longer for bad news to spread through the Chinese system, and it may require the problem to reach a certain magnitude before it does so.

An additional challenge that China faces is that the CCP's censorship regime can make it difficult to speak candidly about important but sensitive subjects in public-facing media and official reports. As we described above, CCP leaders often leverage the *neican* internal reporting system—confidential reports that state-run media, think tanks, and universities produce to keep leaders informed about sensitive issues—to receive more candid assessments that would otherwise face censorship.[54] Xi has emphasized the importance of the *neican* system, making it riskier to share unwelcome news, even internally, as his control has tightened. Some have admitted to altering their reports to avoid repercussions, ironically undermining the system's original purpose of providing candid assessments.[55] Therefore, such measures are not a perfect solution to the challenges that politicization poses.

We draw on two examples to illustrate how China's national security system can produce inaccurate information streams, sometimes because of politicization: the PRC's responses to COVID-19 outbreak in 2019–2020 and the EP-3 incident in 2001.

The initial outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019–2020 illustrates how politicization can distort information streams. Local Chinese officials in Wuhan initially responded to the virus by suppressing accurate information about the extent of the problem and delaying reporting to the central government for as long as possible because they feared political repercussions.[56] When the COVID-19 pandemic spread, local officials encouraged doctors to leave out information from China's national reporting system "over a political aversion to sharing bad news," resulting in a significant delay in

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[51] Jie Gao, "'Bypass the Lying Mouths:' How Does the CCP Tackle Information Distortion at Local Levels?" *China Quarterly*, Vol. 228, December 2016.

[52] "What Is China's 'Li Keqiang Index,'" BBC, October 17, 2013.

[53] Wong, 2025.

[54] Tsai, 2015; "Chinese Whispers," *The Economist*, June 17, 2010; Mark Magnier, "Rosy Reports from Underlings Leave Chinese Leaders in the Dark," *Los Angeles Times*, February 16, 2004.

[55] Kang, 2022.

[56] Edward Wong, Julian E. Barnes, and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Local Officials in China Hid Coronavirus Dangers from Beijing, U.S. Agencies Find," *New York Times*, August 19, 2020.

responding to the virus.[57] Additionally, local officials at the central, provincial, and municipal levels concealed information about the outbreak; blamed transmission purely on exposure to the Huanan seafood market; and downplayed the rate of human-to-human transmission to avoid contradicting the beliefs of senior leadership.[58] Officials were essentially placed under a gag order in the early days of the pandemic to prevent sharing information that the central government did not approve, including silencing such whistleblowers as Dr. Li Wenliang.[59] The priority was to control political narratives, even if doing so came at the cost of accurate information-sharing.[60] Even retrospectively, China's senior leaders still seemingly seek to prolong their ignorance: The *New York Times* reported that "the senior ranks of the Chinese government do not know, and do not want to know" the origin of the virus and did not wish to investigate for fear of damaging China's global reputation.[61] This response to COVID-19 is representative of a broader pattern. In other public health crises and natural disasters, such as the 2002 SARS outbreak and the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan, local officials also engaged in cover-ups and harassment campaigns because they feared political punishment for their failures to prepare or respond adequately to the crisis.[62]

In the 2001 EP-3 incident, China's leadership made decisions in the early stage of the crisis based on inaccurate information.[63] Notably, then–Chinese General Secretary (and China's former President) Jiang Zemin would later criticize the PLA for its lack of "strategic awareness" during the crisis.[64] The triggering incident was a collision between a U.S. EP-3 military reconnaissance aircraft and a PLA aircraft, which killed the Chinese pilot and forced the U.S. plane to make an emergency landing on China's Hainan Island. The PLA informed CCP leadership that the U.S. EP-3 aircraft made a sudden turn and "rammed" into the PLA aircraft and that a left turn by the EP-3 aircraft would have been unlikely to cause a collision given the PLA aircraft's maneuverability.[65] However, the PLA seemingly failed to accurately contextualize its assessment or to allow other parts of the bureaucracy to vet its findings.[66] Chinese leaders prematurely demanded an apology from the United

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[57] Steven Lee Myers and Chris Buckley, "China Created a Fail-Safe System to Track Contagions. It Failed," *New York Times*, March 29, 2020.

[58] For one early Chinese discussion of this challenge, see Yu Qin [余琴] and Li Shiyun [黎诗韵], "Exclusive Interview with the Second Batch of Experts Sent to Wuhan by the National Health Commission: Why Was Human-to-Human Transmission Not Detected" ["专访卫健委派武汉第二批专家: 为何没发现人传人"], *Caijing* [财经], February 26, 2020. For broader coverage of the issue, see Dali Yang, *Wuhan: How the COVID-19 Outbreak in China Spiraled Out of Control*, Oxford University Press, 2024.

[59] Yang, 2024.

[60] Jing-Bao Nie and Carl Elliott, "Humiliating Whistle-Blowers: Li Wenliang, the Response to Covid-19, and the Call for a Decent Society," *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4, December 2020.

[61] Julian E. Barnes, "C.I.A. Now Favors Lab Leak Theory to Explain Covid's Origins," *New York Times*, January 27, 2025.

[62] Erik Eckholm, "China Admits Much Higher Number of SARS Cases," *New York Times*, April 20, 2003; Thomas Crampton, "WHO Assails China for Faltering on SARS," *New York Times*, June 2, 2003; Howard W. French, "Earthquake Opens Gap in Controls on Media," *New York Times*, May 18, 2008.

[63] Jost, 2023a, p. 84.

[64] Jost, 2023a, p. 85.

[65] U.S. Department of State, "Beijing to State, P-3 Incident: Ambassador's April 2 Meeting at MFA," F-2010-07070, April 2, 2001; Wu Xinbo, "Managing Crisis and Sustaining Peace Between China and the United States," United States Institute of Peace, April 2008, p. 21.

[66] Jost, 2023a, p. 85.

States and only later discovered that the Chinese pilot, Wang Wei, was at fault.[67] This is not to say that Jiang would necessarily have apologized to the United States if he had had accurate information, only that his decisions were based on inaccurate information. He may have taken a different approach if he had understood clearly how events really unfolded. For his part, the historical record is clear that Jiang was displeased with the PLA and criticized it for its lack of "strategic awareness."[68] Although attributing the exact cause of this inaccurate information is difficult—the PLA might have been careless in its original assessment or concealed information because of the fear of the repercussion for admitting blame—this failure highlights that the PLA might fail to communicate its level of confidence or conduct thorough investigations before passing information to senior leadership.

Additionally, there were communication failures between the United States and China surrounding the EP-3 incident. In the months preceding the collision, a U.S. military attaché in Beijing had warned PLA leadership that China's intercepts were becoming increasingly dangerous, but the dangerous intercepts continued and CCP leadership appeared unaware of this prior U.S. communication during the crisis.[69] This further reinforces that U.S. policymakers cannot assume that information will make its way through the Chinese system to the intended audience, particularly when the information is unwelcome or reflects poorly on China, because officials may be especially reluctant to report negative developments up the chain of command.

In the U.S.-China context, inaccurate information streams can significantly influence foreign policy interactions by distorting PRC (or U.S.) leaders' understanding of events. For example, if lower-level actors in the Chinese system are reluctant to share bad news, senior Chinese leaders may receive delayed or inaccurate reports about potential U.S. actions in a crisis. Conversely, U.S. policymakers may also receive flawed intelligence, such as assessments that overstate unity and underestimate internal debates and caution within the Chinese leadership. U.S. leaders may misinterpret Chinese actions, such as military exercises that were intended only as posturing and signaling for domestic audiences as a message for the United States or an indicator of plans to take more-escalatory actions in the future. These kinds of misinterpretations can prompt hardline responses that lead to unnecessary escalation and miss diplomatic opportunities.

Building Block 2: China's Analytic Tendencies

China's decisionmakers and national security communities often have distinct analytic approaches that inform their perspectives on national security. Two key tendencies within China's national security apparatus have been especially influential in shaping the CCP's worldview. This section briefly discusses these two tendencies before examining how *cognitive biases*, *organizational influences*, and *emotional factors* further influence analysis of national security issues.

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[67] CIA, "Appraisal of the Situation: Chinese Leadership Perspectives on the Effects of the April 1 Collision of a U.S. EP-3 Aircraft and a Chinese F-8 Fighter," CIA Reading Room, April 7, 2001.

[68] Jost, 2023a.

[69] Michael D. Swaine, Tuosheng Zhang, and Danielle Cohen, *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006, p. 278.

First, the CCP's top priority is ensuring the regime's survival and domestic political stability, and it tends to fixate on perceived external threats to its internal security.[70] China's leaders often blame "external" or "foreign" forces for domestic setbacks and failures, including for domestic protests in response to local issues. For instance, the CCP blamed "hostile forces" for engaging in "infiltration and sabotage activities" when protests broke out against the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2022.[71] It also blamed the United States for inciting the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, among many other episodes of domestic discontent.[72] In China's 2015 defense white paper, Beijing claimed, "Anti-China forces have never given up their attempt to instigate a 'color revolution' in this country."[73] In a 2018 speech, Xi Jinping said that "various hostile forces have never stopped implementing strategies to Westernize and divide our country . . . . They have never stopped carrying out subversive and sabotaging activities against the leadership of the party and our country's socialist system, and they have always attempted to plot a 'color revolution' in our country."[74] In sum, China often links perceived external threats to its own internal security, which is its top priority.

Second, Chinese leaders often view external security threats through a worst-case lens, especially when it comes to chronic mistrust of the United States.[75] China's leaders often ascribe almost all U.S. actions to part of an all-encompassing effort to thwart China's rise and undermine its prosperity. In March 2023, for example, Xi accused the United States of engaging in "all-around containment, encirclement and suppression of China," which he blamed for "unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development."[76] Although the United States is certainly engaged in competition with China for military and economic power, China's leaders consistently overstate the intensity of these efforts and the coherence of different U.S. actions as part of a larger master strategy. This includes concerns about the U.S. threat to the CCP's survival and the belief that the U.S. government is committed to instigating a "color revolution" or "peaceful evolution" that will overthrow the regime.[77] Although China frequently accuses Western countries of having a hostile "Cold War mentality" that influences

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[70] State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2025.

[71] Saibal Dasgupta, "China Blames Foreigners for Inciting Protests," Voice of America, December 2, 2022.

[72] Dean Napolitano, "Beijing Blames US for Spreading Anti-China Establishment in Hong Kong," *Nikkei Asia*, September 25, 2019.

[73] State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China [中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室], *China's Military Strategy* [中国的军事战略], 2015.

[74] The speech was given at the National Education Conference on September 10, 2018, but published widely only in 2024. See Xi Jinping, "To Cultivate Socialist Builders and Successors with an All-Round Development in Moral, Intellectual, Physical, Aesthetic, and Labor Education" ["培养德智体美劳全面发展的社会主义建设者和接班人"], *Seeking Truth* [求是], August 31, 2024.

[75] Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, Brookings Institution, 2012; Yuanyue Dang and William Zheng, "In China, Fear of Regime Change Has Shaped US Policy. Here's Why," *South China Morning Post*, November 5, 2024.

[76] Keith Bradsher, "China's Leader, with Rare Bluntness, Blames U.S. Containment for Troubles," *New York Times*, March 7, 2023.

[77] As quoted in 2018 speech from Xi Jinping (2024). *Peaceful evolution* [和平演变] refers to a U.S. strategy during the Cold War aimed at promoting democratic values and liberalization within communist states through non-military means. Deng Xiaoping [邓小平], "Uphold Socialism and Prevent Peaceful Evolution Nov 23, 1989" ["坚持社会主义，防止和平演变 Nov 23, 1989"], *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Vol. 3, 1994; Bo Yibo, "To Prevent 'Peaceful Evolution' and Train Successors to the Revolutionary Cause," trans. by Qiang Zhai, *Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project*, Vol. 6–7, Winter 1995, p. 228.

how they view China, it seemingly applies a similar lens in how it interprets information about the United States.[78] This mindset exists at multiple levels within the Chinese system. For example, the Chinese intelligence community reportedly describes "foreign targets . . . in the worst possible light" to China's leaders.[79]

Cognitive Biases

Cognitive biases—systematic deviations from rational decisionmaking—shape China's national security decisions, as they do those of other countries. A large body of research from psychology demonstrates that humans are "predictably irrational" in the sense that they often make decisions in ways that deviate from scientifically rational models of decisionmaking.[80] These biases are not limited by culture or status; they are rooted in human psychology and affect both the public and elite government decisionmakers worldwide, including in China.[81]

In the Chinese context, cognitive biases influence how leaders interpret information, assess risks, and respond to international events. For example, *loss aversion* may lead Chinese officials to take greater risks to avoid perceived losses to national prestige or territorial integrity, rather than to pursue equivalent gains. *Intentionality bias* can cause Chinese decisionmakers to interpret foreign actions—such as U.S. military maneuvers or diplomatic visits—as deliberate provocations, rather than accidental or routine occurrences. *Availability bias* may result in Chinese leaders focusing on the most visible or recent information, even if it is not the most relevant to the situation at hand. These biases also complicate international communication and crisis management. *Confirmation bias* is particularly salient in foreign policy, as Chinese officials may interpret signals from other countries in ways that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs about foreign intentions, making it harder to resolve misunderstandings or de-escalate conflicts.[82] Finally, *mirror-imaging* may lead to Chinese actors mistakenly assuming that another actor's perceptions, motivations, and decision processes are similar to their own, often leading to misinterpretation of intentions and actions.[83]

We draw on the following three cases to illustrate how cognitive biases can shape China's national security decisionmaking during crises: the 2020 October Surprise crisis, the 1999 accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and then–House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022.

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[78] Adam P. Liff, "China and the US Alliance System," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 233, 2018.

[79] Mattis and Brazil, 2019, p. 30.

[80] Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions*, Harper Perennial, 2008.

[81] Joshua D. Kertzer, "Re-Assessing Elite-Public Gaps in Political Behavior," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 66, No. 3, 2022; Keren Yarhi-Milo, Joshua D. Kertzer, and Jonathan Renshon, "Tying Hands, Sinking Costs, and Leader Attributes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 10, 2018; Jie Jiang, David G. Shrider, Huangwen Ting, and Yanran Wu, "Are Mutual Fund Investors Loss Averse? Evidence from China," *Financial Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 2021.

[82] Joshua D. Kertzer, Brian C. Rathbun, and Nina Srinivasan Rathbun, "The Price of Peace: Motivated Reasoning and Costly Signaling in International Relations," *International Organization*, Vo. 74, No. 1, 2020.

[83] Amy B. Zegart, "Why Analysis Is So Hard: The Seven Deadly Biases," in *Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence*, Princeton University Press, 2022. See also Richards J. Heuer, Jr., "Chapter 4. Strategies for Analytical Judgment: Transcending the Limits of Incomplete Information," in *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999.

The October Surprise crisis in 2020 provides a compelling example of how cognitive biases can contribute to profound misperceptions in China's national security decisionmaking system. As outlined in the introduction, the October Surprise crisis resulted from Chinese fears in the months before the 2020 U.S. presidential elections that the United States would start a conflict in the South China Sea to bolster President Donald Trump's domestic political position. Examining this crisis is particularly useful through the lens of cognitive biases because China's perceptions of the United States and its threat environment differed so profoundly from the reality at the time. Explaining this level of misperception requires going beyond access to information alone and considering why Chinese leaders would make such dramatic inferences from such thin evidence.

Several biases can help explain China's distorted threat perceptions in fall 2020. First, mirror-imaging potentially contributed to how Chinese officials took inconsequential and unrelated facts and interpreted them in ways that suggested an impending U.S. attack. Through mirror-imaging, Chinese analysts and leaders projected their own political system's behaviors and civil-military cultural characteristics onto the United States. For example, Chinese commentators projected their Chinese domestic political dynamics, such as centralized authority in a "strong man" and firm party control of the military, onto the U.S. system.[84] In this line of thinking, faced with serious domestic political challenges and in complete control over the military, a strong man might start a conflict abroad. President Trump's "belligerent rhetoric toward China on the campaign trail" reportedly aggravated these concerns in China.[85] Additionally, in September 2020, a U.S. Air Force unit adopted a patch with an image of an MQ-9 drone superimposed on a map of China.[86] Chinese "U.S. watchers," particularly media outlets with ties to Chinese national security circles, such as the *Global Times*, appear to have misinterpreted the patch as evidence of secret U.S. preparations for a war, wrongly assuming a high degree of centralization and internal political censorship in the U.S. military equivalent to PLA practices, which would likely have more carefully controlled the symbols that its units adopted and their publicity.[87]

Second, authority bias involves undue trust in authoritative figures, such as pundits or former government officials. Although speculative, there are possibly two pieces of U.S. media reporting that reinforced Chinese leaders' erroneous belief about an imminent U.S. attack. In August 2020, the *New York Times* published an op-ed that referenced a phone call in which Henry Kissinger, an official with deep experience in U.S.-China relations, reportedly expressed to retired French diplomat Francois Delattre that he "was concerned about the deteriorating state of U.S.-Chinese relations and the risk

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[84] Anna Fifield, "China Worries That Trump, Facing a Tough Election, May Provoke a New Fight," *Washington Post*, September 18, 2020; Ding Yuanhong [丁原洪], "Trump's Domestic and Foreign Policies" ["特朗普执政后的内外政策"], *Foreign Affairs Quarterly* [外交季刊], 2020; Zhao Kejin [赵可金], "Understanding How Trump Governs Through His Personality Traits" ["特朗普治国的个性之源"], Institute of Global Development of Tsinghua University [清华大学全球发展研究院], 2016.

[85] Bill Chappell, "Gen. Milley Defends His Call to a Chinese General About Trump's Rhetoric and the U.S.," NPR, September 15, 2021.

[86] Rachel Cohen, 2020.

[87] The government-affiliated *Global Times* published an editorial in September 2020, explicitly stating that the patch design and the public reporting of the MQ-9 exercise is "unlikely to be an accidental mishap" (see "Editorial: If the U.S. Military Dares to Use Drones to Attack the Nansha Islands and Reefs, It Will Inevitably Face a Fierce Counterattack from the People's Liberation Army (PLA)" ["美军胆敢用无人机攻击南沙岛礁，必遭解放军猛烈反击"], *Global Times* [环球时报], September 28, 2020).

that the situation could slip out of control."[88] The article went on to note that Delattre expressed "his own concerns" that an "October surprise might involve a military incident in the South China Sea that President Trump uses to demonstrate American resolve against President Xi Jinping's China."[89] Given Kissinger's special status among China's elites for his historical role in establishing a U.S.-China diplomatic relationship, this op-ed might have caught Beijing's attention. Then, in September 2020, *Politico* published an article with quotations from two veteran U.S. experts on China, referencing concerns about a potential conflict in the South China Sea.[90] Asia Society's Orville Schell told *Politico* that "what I fear in the next two months is a 'Gulf of Tonkin' like incident—trumped up or real—in the South, East China Sea or Taiwan Straits that leads to a military clash and enables Trump to declare a national emergency."[91] Evan Medeiros, a former senior national security official under the Obama administration, added that observers should "look for 'a naval clash in the South China Sea.'"[92] Already concerned about President Trump resorting to strong man military tactics, Chinese leaders may have heavily weighted what they perceived to be authoritative statements from U.S. experts with insider knowledge that this would manifest as a surprise attack in the South China Sea.

Third, confirmation bias can help explain why China extrapolated so heavily from such thin evidence. Recall that Chinese leaders have had a long-standing belief that the United States harbors malign intentions and aims to destabilize the CCP. Earlier in 2020, then–Deputy National Security Adviser Matt Pottinger and then–Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had made speeches referencing political liberalization in China, which analysts in China appear to have interpreted as demonstrating a stronger commitment to regime change than those of past U.S. administrations.[93] The speeches followed in the wake of an August 2020 opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* in which then–Secretary of Defense Mark Esper identified China as a key competitor and a catalyst for U.S. defense modernization.[94] On September 27, 2020, the U.S. State Department released a press statement entitled "China's Empty Promises in the South China Sea" that urged "the international community to continue to raise its opposition to this unacceptable and dangerous behavior, and to make clear to the CCP that we will hold it to account."[95] Confirmation bias likely nudged Chinese officials to interpret otherwise unimportant information through the filter that the United States was looking for opportunities to threaten the regime. In an interview with the *Washington Post* in September 2020, Shi Yinhong, an influential Chinese scholar based in Beijing, noted that a surprise attack in the South China Sea was "unlikely" but had for the first time become "imaginable."[96]

Turning to a different case, China's reaction to the 1999 bombing of its embassy in Belgrade during the NATO intervention in Kosovo illustrates another cognitive bias. A well-known cognitive

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[88] Roger Cohen, "Opinion: An American Disaster Foretold," *New York Times*, August 28, 2020.

[89] Roger Cohen, 2020.

[90] David Wertime, "Death of Trade Deal with China Could Be 'October Surprise,'" *Politico*, September 10, 2020.

[91] Wertime, 2020.

[92] Wertime, 2020.

[93] Fifield, 2020.

[94] Mark Esper, "The Pentagon Is Prepared for China," *New York Times*, August 24, 2020.

[95] Morgan Ortagus, "China's Empty Promises in the South China Sea," press statement, U.S. Department of State, September 27, 2020.

[96] Fifield, 2020.

bias is *intentionality bias*, in which humans assume that others are acting deliberately and they artificially discount the possibility that bad outcomes were the result of mistakes.[97] This was the case in 1999 with the accidental bombing of China's embassy. Despite U.S. apologies and explanations that the bombing was accidental—and subsequent reviews supporting the interpretation that the strike was indeed an accident—the Chinese government and much of the public remained convinced it was deliberate.[98] The MFA spokesman at the time, Zhu Bangzao, argued that "to pretend that the United States did not know the position of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia is not credible" and that "it was impossible for the U.S. side to mix up these two buildings."[99] Former Chinese President Jiang Zemin claimed, "the United States has state of the art technology, so all the explanations they have given us for what they called a mistaken bombing are absolutely unconvincing."[100] The key insight from this case is not that China should immediately take U.S. claims on face value but that Chinese officials have a low bar for assuming that unintentional U.S. actions are deliberate and that they can be reluctant to accept alternative explanations even as more evidence becomes available.

Finally, U.S.-China communication during the period leading up to and following then–House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's 2022 visit to Taiwan also reflected problems with mirror-imaging and flawed analysis. After Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022, China retaliated with sharp rhetoric and large-scale military exercises. China's core response was likely part of an effort to deter the United States from having senior officials travel to Taiwan in the future, which is not itself an example of flawed perceptions. However, there were elements of U.S.-China interactions that highlighted persistent challenges in bilateral signaling and communication, with both sides overinterpreting actions, underappreciating nonactions, and potentially misunderstanding each other's domestic political dynamics.[101]

Chinese leaders face a recurring challenge in interpreting U.S. domestic political dynamics. This is especially true for understanding the separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches.[102] In 2022, some Chinese officials may have falsely assumed that the U.S. President could fully control congressional actions, especially over members of his own party, and therefore that President Joseph Biden could and should have prevented Pelosi's visit.[103] There are debates within the United States about whether Biden could have actually pressured Pelosi to cancel the trip, so it is possible that the Chinese belief was not a misperception, but it nevertheless is consistent with a recurring tendency to view the U.S. political system as centralized in ways that mirror the Chinese system. Additionally, interviews that the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies conducted after the crisis suggest that at least some Chinese analysts struggled to clearly interpret communications

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[97] Joshua Kertzer, Marcus Holmes, Brad LeVeck, and Carly Wayne, "Hawkish Biases and Group Decision Making," *International Organization*, Vol. 76, No. 3, 2022.

[98] Tang Jiaxuan [唐家璇], *Heavy Storm and Gentle Winds: Tang Jiaxuan's Diplomatic Memoirs* [劲雨煦风：唐家璇外交回忆录], World Affairs Press [世界知识出版社], 2011. On the series of failures that led to the accident, see Steven Lee Myers, "Chinese Embassy Bombing: A Wide Net of Blame," *New York Times*, April 17, 2000b.

[99] Steven Lee Myers, "China Rejects U.S. Actions on Bombing of Embassy," *New York Times*, April 11, 2000a.

[100] Jiang Zemin, interview with "60 Minutes" journalist Mike Wallace, CBS, September 3, 2000.

[101] Andrew Scobell, Shao Yuqun, and Carla Freeman, *The 2022 Pelosi Visit to Taiwan: Assessing U.S.-China Signaling and Action-Reaction Dynamics*, United States Institute of Peace, July 2025.

[102] Ross, 2000.

[103] Scobell, Yuqun, and Freeman, 2025.

from the United States. For example, some interviewees described confusion that the Pelosi visit still occurred after the Biden-Xi phone call on July 28, 2022, believing that Biden's call signaled a reassurance the visit would not happen.[104] Other interviewees in China expressed confusion about how to interpret conflicting messages from different parts of the U.S. government, including contrasting claims from different members of Congress and how to interpret the authority of U.S. think tanks.[105] Deciding how to interpret and prioritize signals from multiple information sources, including discerning which messengers and modes of communication are authoritative or relevant, is a recurring problem for many countries, not just China.[106]

In the U.S.-China context, cognitive biases can distort decisionmaking and make managing crises more difficult. For example, intentionality bias might lead Chinese decisionmakers to interpret U.S. military or diplomatic actions as a deliberate provocation to Beijing even if they were taken for unrelated reasons. Conversely, the United States might fail to understand messages Beijing is actually trying to send if mirror-imaging causes it to interpret Chinese actions as carrying the same meaning and intention as when the United States takes those actions.

Organizational Influences

Organizational influences capture how organizational incentives and procedures shape analytic tendencies. Bureaucratic politics and organizational dynamics can exert pushing and pulling effects on decisionmaking.[107] Organizations develop standard operating procedures to manage contingencies in a structured way that hedges against uncertainty and leverages organizational strengths; however, these procedures can also constrain how members perceive problems and can limit potential solutions. For example, militaries develop doctrine to fight specific wars, and deviating from that doctrine can be difficult even when necessary, as was the case with the U.S. Army in Vietnam.[108] Organizations also tend to advocate taking positions that maximize their importance, resources, and autonomy, and the desire to serve these interests is another potential source of bias in how people from these organizations analyze problems and solutions.[109]

In the Chinese system, a key dynamic is that the CCP itself exerts significant influence over all levels of the government and military. China is a Leninist party-state with the CCP permeating every institution. The CCP has direct control over not only the Chinese civilian government but also the PLA (unlike in many Western countries, where the military is under the control of the civilian government rather than a specific political party). The PLA's political work system is a core mechanism through which the CCP asserts and maintains control over the military, ensuring that the armed forces remain loyal to the party above all else. This system integrates political commissars, CCP

[104] Scobell, Yuqun, and Freeman, 2025, p. 4.

[105] Scobell, Yuqun, and Freeman, 2025, p. 10.

[106] Don Casler and Tyler Jost, "Lost in Transmission: Bureaucracy, Noise, and Communication in International Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 4, 2025.

[107] Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

[108] Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, RAND Corporation, R-967-ARPA, 1972.

[109] Allison and Zelikow, 1999.

committees, and ideological education into all levels of the PLA, embedding CCP oversight and guidance into military decisionmaking in both peacetime and wartime.[110] The CCP as a bureaucratic institution acts as a conveyor belt for the development, dissemination, and enforcement of the party's official ideology throughout every facet of Chinese society and its institutions. This pervasive influence enables the CCP to shape the Chinese national security community's strategic worldview and priorities.[111] Even as the party's relationship with its ideological roots has evolved over time, the CCP serves as an institutional mechanism to preserve a Marxist-Leninist lens in government policymaking.[112]

The influence of ideology on Chinese foreign policy has fluctuated over time, but it has grown stronger under Xi. Whereas Xi's predecessors exhibited ideological inclinations that are not as strong, especially compared with those in the Chinese system in the Mao era, Xi appears to have a deeper commitment to the CCP's political ideology.[113] Under Xi, the CCP has explicitly emphasized ideological competition with the West, framing China's rise as part of a broader struggle against Western values and models of governance. This orientation is reflected in such initiatives as the Global Security Initiative, which positions China as a leader in promoting alternative norms and security frameworks that challenge Western dominance. Xi reportedly was deeply shaken by the collapse of the Soviet Union and "often talks about the Soviet fall as a lesson for China," with one of Xi's conclusions being that ideology can serve as a source of national cohesion and strength to protect China's rise and avoid a similar fate.[114]

The CCP's Marxist-Leninist worldview, rooted in scientific determinism, encourages the belief that declining powers may resort to conflict to contain rising challengers. Such concerns about stability during power transitions are not unique to China or necessarily even ideological—they are a recurring theme in Western realist theories of international relations—but prevailing ideological views in China amplify the intensity of these fears.[115] This perspective often shapes Chinese interpretations of U.S. actions as efforts to suppress China's rise.[116] This ideological lens also shapes the CCP's

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[110] Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, "Military Political Work at the CCP's Centennial," *China Brief*, Vol. 21, No. 12, June 18, 2021.

[111] Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*, Harper, 2010.

[112] Roland Boer, "To Make Sense of Modern China, You Simply Can't Ignore Marxism," *The Conversation*, November 27, 2014; David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation*, University of California Press, 2008.

[113] "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era Written into Party Constitution" ["习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想写入党章"], Xinhua, October 24, 2017. Also see Henrietta Levin, "Kurt Campbell on China Strategy and Diplomacy," *Pekingology* podcast, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 10, 2025; and Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, Oxford University Press, 2024.

[114] Lingling Wei, "Xi Has Spent Decades Preparing for a Cold War with the U.S.," *Wall Street Journal*, July 4, 2025; "The Flaws That China's Chief Ideologue Found in America," *The Economist*, February 22, 2024; Chris Buckley, "The Man Who Shaped China's Strongman Rule Has a New Job: Winning Taiwan," *New York Times*, May 6, 2023.

[115] Miranda Priebe, *Fear and Frustration: Rising State Perceptions of Threats and Opportunities*, dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Political Science, February 2015.

[116] Although Xi has spoken publicly against the colloquial name for this phenomenon (the Thucydides Trap), it is exactly this discussion of this outlook that strongly suggests that it is on Xi's mind (see "Full Text: President Xi's Speech on China-US Ties," *China Daily*, September 24, 2015; and Matt Bevan, "Xi Jinping Discussed the Thucydides Trap with Malcolm Turnbull, Revealing His View of the World Today," Australian Broadcasting Corporation, July 5, 2021).

interpretation regarding perceptions of American decline and the worsening security environment.[117] The party's official discourse frequently frames the United States as a power in relative decline, beset by internal divisions and waning global influence.[118] This narrative is used to bolster confidence in China's own political model and justify the assertion that China is entering a period of strategic opportunity. Xi often refers to "changes unseen in a century" to capture this idea of shifts in the international system, which he sees not only as an opportunity for China but also as a potential risk if handled poorly—he even referenced this notion to Putin during a visit to Moscow in March 2023.[119] Although Xi sees these shifts as a chance for China to achieve greater influence, he is likely concerned that missteps or failures to adapt could expose the country to new vulnerabilities. For example, the CCP Central Committee's November 2021 "historical resolution," adopted at its sixth plenum, cautioned that "China faces a more severe national security situation, external pressures are unprecedented, and traditional and non-traditional security threats are intertwined."[120]

Beyond ideology, China's national security decisionmaking faces classic challenges that large bureaucracies pose in their ability to operate effectively and cooperate with each other, along with certain challenges particular to China's system. For example, the PLA acts as a bureaucratic interest group that seeks to advance its own importance and acquire resources.[121] But unlike many militaries, the PLA is firmly subordinate to the CCP rather than the PRC state, placing a high emphasis on political loyalty to the CCP first. This creates tensions within the PLA between being "red" versus "expert," with Xi directing the military to prepare to fight modern wars but still demanding political loyalty and training so that CCP leadership can still trust the military.[122] This growing focus on military expertise creates further political tensions because, as the military becomes more specialized and distinct, the increasing specialization may raise concerns among civilian CCP leadership about its political reliability, as it has in the past.[123] In addition to the concern about the political reliability of the PLA to the CCP, top leaders have at times been concerned with the political reliability of the PLA to them (personal loyalty to individual leaders). Xi's removal of a significant and growing number of high-ranking military officers, while officially described as an anti-corruption campaign, is also likely

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[117] Katja Drinhausen and Helena Legarda, "Confident Paranoia: Xi's 'Comprehensive National Security' Framework Shapes China's Behavior at Home and Abroad," *MERICS China Monitor*, September 15, 2022; Ryan Mitchell, "China's Crown Theorist," *Foreign Affairs*, December 4, 2017; Wang Huning [王沪宁], *America Against America* [美国反对美国], Shanghai Humanities Publishing Co. [上海文艺出版社], January 1, 1991.

[118] Chris Buckley, "'The East Is Rising': Xi Maps Out China's Post-Covid Ascent," *New York Times*, March 3, 2021.

[119] "China's Xi Tells Putin of 'Changes Not Seen for 100 Years,'" Al Jazeera, March 22, 2023; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Oxford University Press, 2021; Kim Fassler, "'Profound Changes Unseen in a Century': China Assesses Its Security Environment," in Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch, eds., *The PLA in a Complex Security Environment: Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters*, National Bureau of Asian Research, 2025.

[120] "Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experiences of the Party's Centennial Struggle" ["中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议"], Xinhua, November 16, 2021.

[121] Isaac B. Kardon and Phillip C. Saunders, "Reconsidering the PLA as an Interest Group," in Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds., *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking*, Stanford University Press, 2015.

[122] Joel Wuthnow, "Can Xi Jinping Control the PLA?" *China Leadership Monitor*, March 2025.

[123] David Shambaugh, "The Soldier and the State in China: The Political Work System in the People's Liberation Army," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 127, September 1991; Andrew Scobell, "China's Evolving Civil-Military Relations: Creeping *Guojiahua*," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2, Winter 2005.

driven, at least in part, by his desire to consolidate personal control and eliminate rival power bases (in addition to addressing well-known challenges with systemic corruption).[124] Continued purges of high-level national security officials could produce a cowed military leadership in China, unwilling to stand up for its own professional views and expertise if those views displease Xi, exacerbating the echo chamber problem discussed earlier.

Furthermore, China has other civil-military issues that are separate from questions of political reliability and loyalty. Over time, the number of senior CCP officials with significant military experience has fallen, leading to a system in which there is less civilian expertise on military affairs and fewer deep personal relationships between civilian and military leaders. This trend could further deepen civil-military divides within the Chinese system going forward.[125]

China's 2007 test of a direct-ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon and shifts in its counterspace doctrine illustrate the impact that these civil-military divides can have on China's decisionmaking. In 2007, China conducted a destructive ASAT test against a Chinese weather satellite, creating thousands of pieces of orbital debris that then threatened other satellites in orbit.[126] By some accounts, organizational dynamics shaped the decision to go forward with a destructive test. Although the specifics are unclear, the PLA reportedly downplayed to PRC leadership the severity of the orbital debris that would result from a destructive test.[127] The PLA had already reportedly conducted nondestructive ASAT tests and could have continued to do so, and the PLA could have also conducted a destructive test in a different way that minimized debris.[128] The PLA's organizational incentives to demonstrate a new capability may have encouraged it to push for a destructive test, and U.S. analysts speculate that the engineering background of those in the PLA's weapon development program may also have contributed to civil-military miscommunications:

> [I]t was likely that Chinese officials were advised not on the relative increase in the amount of debris created, but instead on the absolute increase in the risk of damage to another satellite, which is about 1 percent. To an engineer, that number doesn't seem all that high, and . . . engineers were the people driving the development of the ASAT.[129]

Additionally, China's civilian and military leaders reportedly differed in their doctrinal preferences about how to employ ASAT weapons in the years that followed, with military leaders primarily viewing them as standard warfighting tools but civilian leaders viewing them more as tools for strategic

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[124] Timothy R. Heath, *The Consolidation of Political Power in China Under Xi Jinping: Implications for the PLA and Domestic Security Forces*, RAND Corporation, CT-503, 2019.

[125] Yu Bin, "The Fourth Generation Leaders and the New Military Elite," in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Relations in Today's China: Swimming in a New Sea*, M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2007.

[126] William Broad and David Sanger, "China Tests Anti-Satellite Weapon, Unnerving U.S.," *New York Times*, January 18, 2007.

[127] Gregory Kulacki and Jeffrey Lewis, "A Different View of China's ASAT Test," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 13, 2007; Gregory Kulacki and Jeffrey Lewis, "Understanding China's Antisatellite Test," *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2008; Fiona Cunningham, *Under the Nuclear Shadow: China's Information-Age Weapons in International Security*, Princeton University Press, 2025.

[128] Brian Weeden and Victoria Samson, eds., *Global Counterspace Capabilities: An Open Source Assessment*, Secure World Foundation, 2024.

[129] Kulacki and Lewis, 2007.

signaling and worrying about the debris that widespread use in conflict would create.[130] In sum, differences in organizational backgrounds and priorities between civilian and military leaders can lead to divergent perspectives and incentives between the two groups.

In the U.S.-China context, organizational influences can complicate crisis management. China's Leninist political system, combined with the CCP's own history, reinforces China's tendency for worst-case thinking on U.S. intentions toward containing China's rise, making it more likely that China will interpret U.S. actions as part of an effort to destabilize the regime. Additionally, organizational pressures on the military to demonstrate its loyalty to the party could reinforce tendencies to provide leaders with advice that appeals to party leaders rather than based on the best possible professional military advice.

Emotional Influences

The term *emotional influences* captures the role of human emotions in shaping decisionmaking. Emotions are specific feelings and affective states in reaction to one's environment, such as happiness, fear, or surprise.[131] Emotional influences are not inherently an impediment to rational or effective decisionmaking, and can support better decisionmaking.[132] But emotions do shape how decisionmakers perceive their environment and their choice sets in important ways, and understanding a competitor's potential actions requires keeping in mind that they will not always make perfectly cool and calculated decisions.[133] Emotions are especially likely to shape decisionmaking during periods of high stress, a fact that is relevant to crises and conflicts.[134] Knowing which emotions someone is experiencing is not dispositive of how they will behave, but emotions do provide clues about what kinds of responses are more or less likely. For example, anger encourages behaviors associated with greater risk acceptance and aggression.[135] Other negative emotions, such as fear, hatred, resentment, humiliation, and outrage, can also fuel competition and violence.[136] Resentment and fear about losing status can be particularly powerful drivers of using force, as seen in ethnic and international conflicts,

[130] Cunningham, 2025.

[131] Rose McDermott, *Political Psychology in International Relations*, University of Michigan Press, 2004, p. 160; Rose McDermott, "How Emotions Shape Crisis Decision-Making: The Role of Fear, Anger, and Risk," in Hillary Rodham Clinton and Keren Yarhi-Milo, eds., *Inside the Situation Room: The Theory and Practice of Crisis Decision-Making*, Oxford University Press, 2025, p. 83.

[132] McDermott, 2017.

[133] Reid Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International Security*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2023.

[134] McDermott, 2025, p. 93; Aidan Millif, *Seeking Safety: The Cognitive Foundations of Civilian Behavior During Violence*, dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Political Science, September 2022.

[135] Kathleen Powers and Dan Altman, "The Psychology of Coercion Failure: How Reactance Explains Resistance to Threats," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 67, No. 1, 2022; Rose McDermott, Anthony Lopez, and Peter Hatemi, "'Blunt Not the Heart, Enrage It': The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2017, p. 69.

[136] Roger Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

potentially including Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[137] Positive emotions, such as happiness and hope, can instead promote trust and thereby cooperation and stability.[138]

Emotional factors in Chinese political decisionmaking are deeply intertwined with historical narratives, national identity, and the CCP's quest for legitimacy. Shame, pride, and fear play a role in historical memories of Western interventions, the Cultural Revolution, and the fall of the Soviet Union, all of which help fuel fears of instability and regime change through color revolutions.[139] The Chinese government promotes a historical narrative that emphasizes both the trauma and the resilience of the Chinese nation, institutionalizing this portrayal through the education system, state media, and cultural productions.[140] This narrative often refers to the Century of Humiliation, beginning with the First Opium War, and emphasizes that this was a period in which foreign powers systematically violated China's sovereignty.[141] This collective memory fosters a sense of nationalism, heightening sensitivity to perceived infringements on sovereignty. The Chinese government frames certain incidents, such as the 2001 EP-3 incident and the 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing, not only as diplomatic crises but also as affronts to national dignity that require assertive responses.[142]

Below, we provide two examples to highlight how emotional factors may shape Chinese national security decisionmaking: China's space program and China's territorial disputes.

The first example is China's space program. Emotional factors, such as national pride and shame about the historical legacy of humiliation, may help drive China's ambitions in space.[143] The aspiration to restore China's status as a leading global power is deeply embedded in both state policy and societal consciousness. Under Xi, the concept of "national rejuvenation" has been elevated to a "strategic plan" aimed at "achieving lasting greatness for the Chinese nation."[144] China's leadership touts major achievements in space, such as becoming the first country to land a rover on the far side of the moon in

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[137] Petersen, 2002; Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*, Princeton University Press, 2017; Andrew Higgins, "Putin Sees Ukraine Through a Lens of Grievance over Lost Glory," *New York Times*, August 17, 2025.

[138] Brian Rathbun, "Before Hegemony: Generalized Trust and the Creation and Design of International Security Organizations," *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 2, 2011.

[139] Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, Columbia University Press, 2012; Shanshan Mei and Dennis J. Blasko, "Don't Ever Invade China," *War on the Rocks*, August 2024a.

[140] Nicholas Ross Smith and Tracey Fallon, "How the CCP Uses History," *The Diplomat*, July 1, 2021.

[141] Alison A. Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation' and China's National Narratives," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic Security Review Commission congressional hearing, March 10, 2011; Zheng Wang, "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4, December 2008.

[142] "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson: The U.S. Should Immediately Cease Close-In Reconnaissance Activities," Xinhua, February 9, 2023.

[143] Kevin Pollpeter, Timothy Ditter, Anthony Miller, and Brian Waidelich, *China's Space Narrative: Examining the Portrayal of the US-China Space Relationship in Chinese Sources and Its Implications for the United States*, China Aerospace Studies Institute, March 2019; Kevin Pollpeter, Eric Anderson, Jordan Wilson, and Fan Yan, *China Dream, Space Dream* [中国梦，航天梦]: *China's Progress in Space Technologies and Implications for the United States*, report prepared for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2015; R. L. Hines, A *Place in the Stars: Prestige and Legitimacy in China's Quest for Space Power*, doctoral thesis, Cornell University, 2021.

[144] Xi Jinping, "Continue Striving Courageously Toward the Goal of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" [习近平：继续朝着中华民族伟大复兴目标奋勇前进], Xinhua, November 29, 2012. Note that this is the official English translation of the phrase; however, a more accurate translation of the phrase from its original Chinese would be "great rejuvenation of the Chinese race." Jamil Anderlini, "The Dark Side of China's National Renewal," *Financial Times*, June 21, 2017.

2019, as tangible demonstrations of national resurgence.[145] Xi has said, "The dream of space flight [飞天梦] is an important part of the strong country dream" and that "the space dream is an important component of realizing the Chinese people's mighty dream of national rejuvenation."[146] Appealing to these kinds of emotional narratives likely has domestic political motivations, but the perceived benefits and potential necessity of making emotional appeals and exhortations are likely more than a simple rhetorical device and also shape decisions about policy priorities and resource allocation.

The second example is China's territorial disputes. There are various factors that drive China's territorial claims and decisions about when to use military force to defend its claims.[147] But psychological attachments to territory and emotional narratives about pride and status make it difficult for China to back down from claims once it has made them.[148] For example, Xi has asserted that "[n]o foreign country should expect us to trade away our core interests, nor should anyone expect us to swallow the bitter fruit of harm to our sovereignty, security, or development interests."[149] This framing links external threats and foreign policy outcomes to emotions (e.g., pride in China's perceived status and legitimacy) and potentially fear and shame about the prospect of sacrificing those values to foreign pressure.

In the U.S.-China context, emotional factors could complicate efforts to de-escalate crises or conflicts once they have begun. Because China is particularly sensitive to perceived affronts to its national pride and dignity, U.S. actions or threats seen as threatening to China's status may provoke hostile responses at times that encourage escalation rather than compelling China to back down. Because there is deep emotional resonance to such territorial issues as the status of Taiwan, China might also view its territorial disputes through a different lens from that of the United States, complicating efforts to communicate and negotiate because each side comes at the issue from such a different perspective.

Building Block 3: China's Institutional Authorities

The third and final building block is who has the authority to make different decisions. The distribution of decisionmaking authority in China is dynamic, often shifting in response to changing circumstances, particularly during periods of crisis. In today's China, Xi has come to simultaneously hold so many different positions that Western experts have given him the moniker of "Chairman of Everything."[150] But even with China's highly centralized political system, it is not feasible for a single

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[145] Pollpeter et al., 2019.

[146] "Xi Jinping: 'Space to Earth Communications' Encourages China's Dream of Spaceflight" ["习近平 '天地通话'激励中国飞天梦"], Xinhua, June 25, 2013; "The Space Dream and the China Dream" [["航天梦与中国梦"], *China Space News* [中国航天报], July 31, 2013, as cited in Pollpeter et al., 2015.

[147] Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, Princeton University Press, 2009.

[148] Stacie Goddard, "Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 1, 2006.

[149] Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Celebration of the 95th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China (July 1, 2016)" ["习近平在庆祝中国共产党成立 95 周年大会上的讲话 (July 1, 2016)"], *People's Daily* [人民日报], July 2, 2016.

[150] Joe McDonald, "President Xi Jinping, China's 'Chairman of Everything,'" Associated Press, February 3, 2022.

leader to make every decision related to national security. This raises the questions: Who within the Chinese system is responsible for which decisions, and under what conditions does this responsibility shift?

Understanding China's system requires distinguishing between formal authorities, informal authorities, and unauthorized initiative—actions undertaken independently of explicit approval. Although institutional rules and hierarchical structures designate formal authorities, in practice, decisionmaking in China often relies on such informal mechanisms as personal networks and established institutional norms, reflecting a tradition of "rule by man" rather than "rule of law."[151]

Formal Authorities

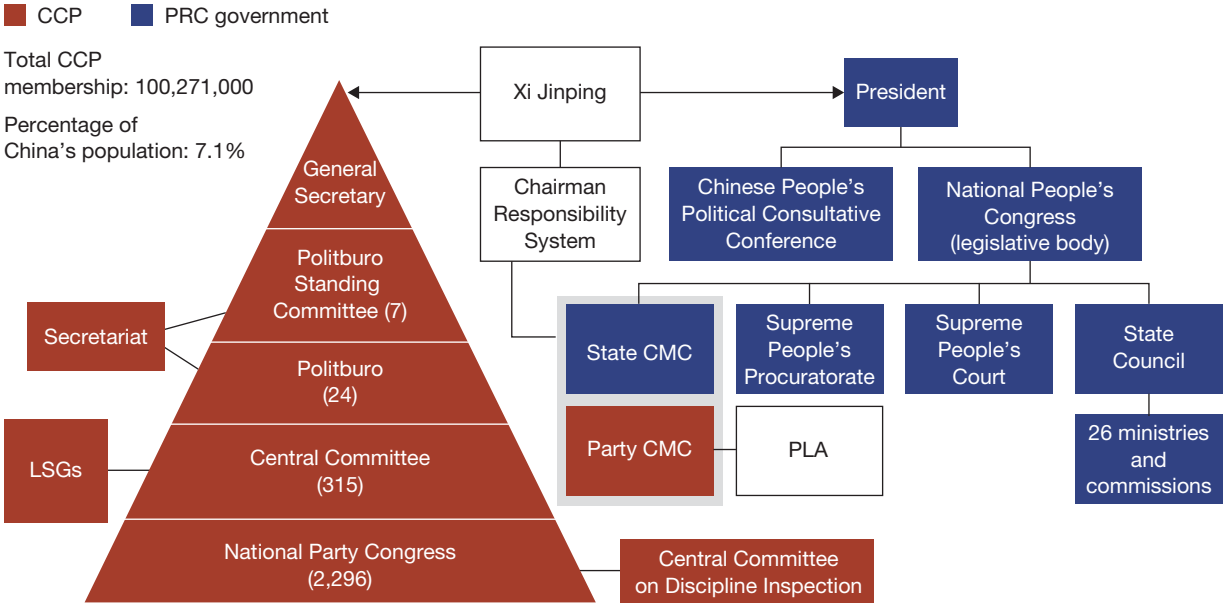
China's political system is defined by the CCP's centralized and hierarchical leadership. The CCP exercises ultimate authority over the Chinese state, military, and society. The CCP's dominance is institutionalized through a complex organizational structure (see Figure 1). The Politburo Standing Committee is the CCP's apex leadership body, followed by the Politburo, Central Committee, and various functional departments. The General Secretary of the CCP—who concurrently serves as President of the PRC and Chairman of the CMC—occupies the paramount leadership position.[152] This concentration of authority enables the CCP's top leadership to set strategic priorities and policy directions, while lower-level officials manage implementation and ensuring compliance with central directives.

[151] Shaomin Li, "China's Legal System Is Not About the Rule of Law: The Advantages and Limits of the Relation-Based System," in *The Rise of China, Inc.: How the Chinese Communist Party Transformed China into a Giant Corporation*, Cambridge University Press, 2022.

[152] It is important to note that the simultaneous occupation of all three positions is not a guarantee, and it is not the norm for the paramount leader to be granted these three titles at the same time. For example, Hu Jintao was elected as Chairman of the CCP and President of the PRC in March 2003; however, Jiang Zemin did not relinquish the title of Chairman of the CMC until September 2004 (People's Daily Online, "Hu Jintao," webpage, undated; Tyler Jost and Daniel C. Mattingly, "After Xi: The Succession Question Obscuring China's Future—and Unsettling Its Present," *Foreign Affairs*, August 4, 2025).

Figure 1. China's Party-State Political Structure

Leadership organizations within the CCP in relation to the government of the PRC



SOURCE: Adapted from US-China Business Council, *China's 2017 Communist Party Leadership Structure & Transition*, June 2017, p. 1.
NOTE: LSG = leading small group. Although the Politburo has historically consisted of 25 members, the 20th Party Congress selected only 24 members. This total fell to 23 members in October 2025 following the expulsion of He Weidong from the CCP. In late January 2026, Politburo member Zhang Youxia was placed under investigation. However, as of January 30, 2026, there were no official statements declaring Zhang's removal from the CCP, and the CCP had not removed Zhang from the list of Politburo members. China's president is the head of state, but the Premier as the head of the State Council is technically the head of government (see "The 20th Central Committee Plenary Session" ["二十届中央委员会全体会议"], People's Daily Online, undated; Albee Zhang and Ryan Woo, "China's New Elite Communist Party Leadership," Reuters, October 23, 2022; "Central Leadership Channel" ["中央领导同志频道"], Xinhua, undated; "The Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee Was Held in Beijing" ["中共二十届四中全会在京举行"], Xinhua, October 24, 2025; Ministry of National Defense, "He Weidong, Miao Hua, and Seven Others Expelled from the Party and Military for Serious Violations of Discipline and Law" ["何卫东、苗华等9人严重违纪违法被开除党籍军籍"], People's Republic of China, October 17, 2025; Ministry of National Defense, "Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli Under Investigation for Serious Violations of Discipline and Law" ["张又侠、刘振立涉嫌严重违纪违法被立案审查调查"], People's Republic of China, January 24, 2026; Organization Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, "Statistical Communiqué of the Communist Party of China" ["中国共产党党内统计公报"], June 30, 2025; "Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on National Economic and Social Development in 2024" ["中华人民共和国2024年国民经济和社会发展统计公报"], National Bureau of Statistics [国家统计局网], February 28, 2025).

China's civilian government operates under the overarching guidance of the CCP. The National People's Congress (NPC) is constitutionally designated as the most powerful state actor; however, in practice, its legislative and supervisory functions are subordinate to CCP leadership.[153] The State Council, led by the Premier, is responsible for the administration of government affairs but remains accountable to the CCP. The second most powerful person in China usually holds the position of Premier (with the most powerful person being the aforementioned paramount leader, currently Xi). CCP committees are embedded throughout government agencies, state-owned enterprises, private

[153] According to Chinese laws, the NPC holds the authority to declare war and decide on matters of war and peace, with this power delegated to its Standing Committee when the NPC is not in session. State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, Constitution of the People's Republic of China, Article 62, Item 15, last updated November 20, 2019; NPC, National Defense Law of the People's Republic of China, Article 41, last updated December 27, 2020.

companies, and social organizations, ensuring that party discipline and policy priorities are maintained across all sectors.

China's political system has undergone significant centralization of power since Xi assumed leadership in 2012.[154] Xi has broken the recent precedent of collective leadership and regularized succession.[155] He abolished presidential term limits in 2018, and he has implemented campaigns designed to reinforce party loyalty and ensure the CCP's dominance in all aspects of governance and society.[156] These include far-reaching anti-corruption campaigns, which serve a dual purpose of tackling real challenges with corruption in China's political system and helping purge Xi's political rivals and reinforce his personal control over the CCP.

Xi has also elevated his own position by accumulating multiple key titles and establishing new leading small groups (LSGs) and commissions directly under his control.[157] Under Xi, LSGs have rapidly expanded in number, and they appear to be more deeply involved in the policy decisionmaking process than they were under past paramount leaders.[158] But an LSG's influence depends heavily on the personal authority of its leadership rather than just its formal position in institutional structures, similar to much of the governance process in China.[159] Xi personally chairs more than a dozen LSGs and "commissions," which are the "more powerful" cousins of LSGs.[160] For example, Xi leads the Taiwan Affairs LSG, Commission for Foreign Affairs, and the Central National Security Commission (CNSC).[161]

The PLA is the armed wing of the CCP, and its command and control structure reflects that it is the party's army rather than a national military. The CMC serves as the highest military decisionmaking body of the PLA, and the General Secretary (currently Xi) chairs the CMC.[162] Under the Chairman Responsibility System [军委主席负责制], the CMC exercises unified command over every PLA service.[163] The CMC is responsible for formulating military strategy, issuing operational directives, and overseeing force development. The MND manages (1) the PLA's external relations

[154] Jonathan Czin, "Burying Deng: Xi Jinping and the Abnormalization of Chinese Politics," *China Leadership Monitor*, Spring 2025.

[155] Czin, 2025.

[156] Heath, 2019.

[157] Christopher K. Johnson, Scott Kennedy, and Mingda Qiu, "Xi's Signature Governance Innovation: The Rise of Leading Small Groups," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 17, 2017.

[158] Nis Grünberg, "The CCP's Nerve Center," Mercator Institute for China Studies, July 1, 2021.

[159] Jiying Jiang, "Leading Small Groups, Agency Coordination, and Policy Making in China," *China Journal*, Vol. 89, 2023.

[160] Nis Grünberg, "Xi's Control Room: The Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform," Mercator Institute for China Studies, September 28, 2022.

[161] Wuthnow, 2022.

[162] The General Secretary currently chairs the CMC as of 2026; however, historically, this has not always been the case.

[163] For an official description of the CMC Chairman Responsibility System, see China International Communications Group, "The CMC Chairperson Responsibility System," November 10, 2021. Also note that, in 2024, the Information Support Force, Cyber and Aerospace Forces were established to replace the Strategic Support Force (SSF) (see "Inaugural Meeting of the PLA Information Support Force Held in Beijing: Xi Jinping Presents the Military Flag and Delivers an Address" ["中国人民解放军信息支援部队成立大会在京举行 习近平向信息支援部队授予军旗并致训词"], Xinhua, April 19, 2024).

with foreign militaries and foreign press and (2) the PLA's internal relations with other national-level ministries and local governments.[164] The MND has no role in the operational chain of command.

The PLA has an internal structure with the individual services generating forces and theater commands managing joint operations in different geographic areas. To improve the PLA's ability to conduct joint operations, Xi revised the division of labor within the PLA, with the CMC providing "general management" [军委管总], the theater commands focusing on operations [战区主战], and the services managing force-building [军种主建].[165] The PLA's theater command structure was established as part of major military reforms initiated in 2015.[166] The country is divided into five theater commands (Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central), each responsible for joint operations within its geographic area.[167] Theater commands report directly to the CMC. In principle, operations should be conducted using the new national-level joint operations command center under the CMC's Joint Staff Department or using theater-level joint command and control mechanisms, as shown in Figure 2. All overseas military operations—including peacekeeping, anti-piracy patrols, humanitarian assistance, and the protection of Chinese interests abroad—appear to be planned, authorized, and directed by the CMC.[168] However, PLA services continue to maintain a degree of operational responsibilities.[169]

[164] Shanshan Mei and Dennis J. Blasko, "Did China Just Demote Its Defense Ministry?" *Defense One*, August 14, 2024b.

[165] "Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening National Defense and Armed Force Reforms" [中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见], Xinhua, January 1, 2016.

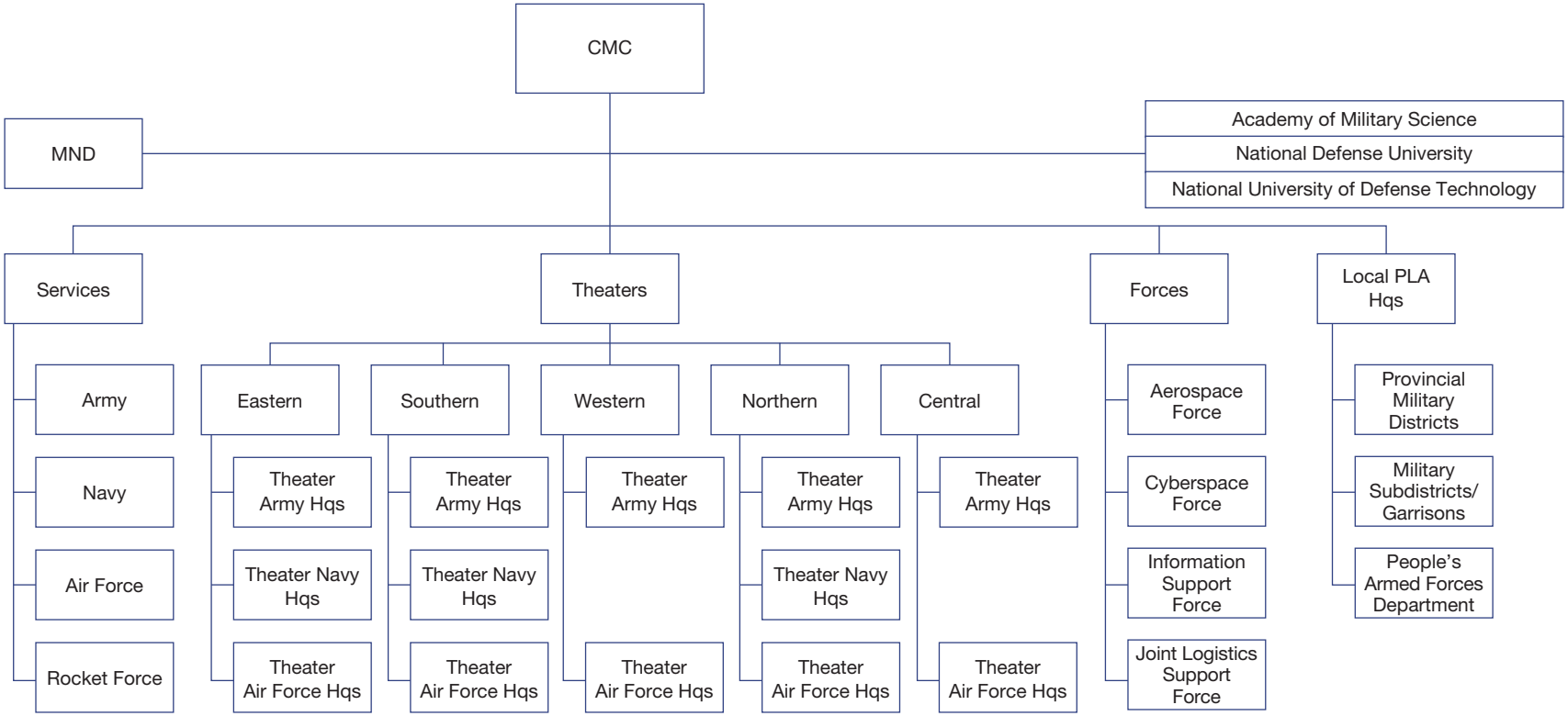
[166] The PLA's strategic guidelines identify specific "strategic directions," designating a primary direction [主要战略方向]—its main focus for operational planning and military deployment, resource allocation, and war preparations—as well as one or more secondary directions [次要战略方向], which receive additional but lesser emphasis according to evolving security interests (see Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Military Strategy for a 'New Era': Some Change, More Continuity, and Tantalizing Hints," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 6–7, 2022).

[167] "What Is Theater Command as the Main Warfighting Body: Commanders of the PLA's Five Theater Commands Explain" ["什么是战区主战：解放军五大战区司令员为你解答"], Xinhua, November 28, 2016; Xiao Ying [肖莹] and Zheng Xinyi [郑心仪], "The New Configuration of the Five Theater Commands Marks the Basic Completion of the Main Components of China's Largest Military Reform in over Sixty Years [五大战区新布局 这标志着中国 60 多年来最大规模军改的主体内容基本完成]," *Global People* [环球人物], Vol. 6, 2016.

[168] Phillip C. Saunders, *Beyond Borders: PLA Command and Control of Overseas Operations*, National Defense University, China Strategic Perspectives No. 17, March 2020.

[169] Saunders, 2020.

Figure 2. PLA Organizational Structure



SOURCE: Adapted from Dennis J. Blasko, "The New PLA Joint Headquarters and Internal Assessments of PLA Capabilities," *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 10, June 2016.
NOTE: Hqs = headquarters.

Within China's formal governance framework, distinct bodies hold authority over different domains of policymaking. The Politburo and its Standing Committee are chiefly responsible for the most consequential decisions on grand strategy and foreign policy, even under Xi's leadership, whereas the CMC generally makes the key decisions on defense matters, which the Politburo or the Standing Committee then ratifies.[170] These arrangements underscore the formalized channels for coordination between China's civilian and military leadership in the national decisionmaking hierarchy.

In the U.S.-China context, China following formal lines of authority in its decisionmaking could bolster stability by making it easier for the United States to understand who is responsible for which decisions and how to engage with different parts of the PRC system. But this requires also understanding how the lines of formal authority might change during a crisis compared with steady-state peacetime competition. Potential shifts in formal authority could vary widely depending on the issue and the context of the crisis or conflict.

Informal Authorities

How bureaucracies and organizations make decisions on paper is not always the same as how they make them in practice. Governments might form new decisionmaking bodies during crises or conflicts that serve as alternatives for normal processes and procedures, as the United States did in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis with the Executive Committee of the National Security Council.[171] Additionally, senior leaders sometimes use informal avenues to support their decisionmaking. By relying on informal avenues, the composition of the advisory groups with access to senior leaders may change. Because they are informal, the staffing for those groups may also differ from that in formal settings, with implications for the information and planning that goes into supporting decisions made in those avenues.

The Chinese system, which has a highly centralized and hierarchical structure, exhibits a distinct pattern of informal authority. In China, paramount leaders rather than lower-level actors are most likely to concentrate and exercise informal authority to bypass formal practices or procedures. Deng Xiaoping's orchestration of the 1979 invasion of Vietnam illustrates this. At the time, Deng occupied several senior formal posts—including Politburo Standing Committee member, Vice Chairman of the CMC, and Chief of General Staff of the PLA—which provided him with formal avenues for influence. Yet his decisive role in initiating and directing the campaign rested less on these titles than on his unrivaled informal authority, derived from revolutionary prestige, dominance over personnel appointments, and broad intraparty support.[172] In January 1979, shortly before the invasion and after the Politburo had agreed in principle, Deng convened key military and political figures in informal

[170] This division of responsibilities is reinforced by such statutory provisions as Article 17 of the National Defense Law, which states that "the State Council and the Central Military Commission shall establish coordination mechanisms to resolve major issues concerning national defense. Relevant departments of central state organs and CMC offices may, as circumstances require, convene meetings to coordinate and resolve matters related to national defense" (see NPC, 2020).

[171] Evans et al., 2024.

[172] Xiaoming Zhang, "Deng Xiaoping and China's Decision to Go to War with Vietnam," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Summer 2010; Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

settings, often drawing on personal connections to shape operational decisions outside the formal Politburo process.[173] Crucially, Hua Guofeng, who nominally held the highest titles across the CCP and PLA, lacked comparable informal standing and was largely sidelined—even reportedly expressing apprehension about the campaign.[174] This case demonstrates that, in the Chinese context, informal authority at the top can supersede formal structures, rendering official organizational charts less relevant than the realities of elite power and tacit decisionmaking, if the paramount leader chooses to intervene.

The personal relationships and political alliances between top leaders and their favorite subordinates can also have a significant impact on which government agencies have outsized power relative to what their formal authorities suggest. For example, the PLA historically dominated the Chinese intelligence community largely because of close personal ties between senior PLA and CCP leaders.[175] More recently, Xi has relied on trusted subordinates he worked with during his 17-year career in Fujian province to help him exercise highly centralized and personalistic control over China's security institutions.[176] These personal ties help explain the rising status of the MSS under Xi's leadership, with a Xi loyalist from Fujian being the first MSS chief ever appointed to the Politburo in 2022.[177] Personal ties and political alliances are therefore an important source of informal authority within the Chinese system, and different combinations of leaders and subordinates can cause changes in which agencies exercise real power to fluctuate over time.

In the U.S.-China context, informal lines of authority could help at times and hurt efforts to manage crises at other times. In some cases, actors reaching across formal lines of authority could be helpful in enabling a more dynamic and flexible Chinese response to a rapidly changing situation, whereas a rigid commitment to standard operating procedures might make crisis management more challenging. At other times, circumventing the normal system might create challenges by generating confusion on both sides about who is responsible for handling certain decisions and who speaks with authority when communicating between the two countries.

Unauthorized Initiative

Unauthorized initiative reflects that lower-level actors sometimes make decisions for which they lack the authority. Sometimes this is in direct and explicit defiance of superiors. For example, in 1931, mid-level officers of the Japanese Kwantung Army went beyond their writ by arranging a false flag attack and the subsequent seizure of central and southern Manchuria in what became known as the Mukden Incident.[178] At other times, subordinates receive ambiguous or conflicting information that results in unauthorized initiative. Leaders might transmit vague or broad guidance to lower-level

[173] Jost, 2024.

[174] Nicholas Kristof, "A Year Later, Signs That Deng Guides China," *New York Times*, January 29, 1991.

[175] Mattis and Brazil, 2019, pp. 12–13.

[176] Zi Yang, "Five Key Factors Behind Irregular Leadership Changes in the People's Liberation Army," *China Brief*, Vol. 25, No. 3, February 14, 2025.

[177] Wong et al., 2023.

[178] Jonathan D. Spence and Janet Y. Chen, *The Search for Modern China*, 4th ed., W. W. Norton and Company, June 2025, p. 391; Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall*, University Press of Kansas, 2009, pp. 166–169.

actors either intentionally or unwittingly.[179] In both cases, vague guidance can inadvertently encourage lower-level officials to take independent actions, often driven by the need to respond to immediate challenges, that can go beyond what high-level leaders intended or even considered.

It is not always clear from the outside whether an action occurs from unauthorized initiative or with formal approval. Aggressive maneuvers and intercepts between aircraft or ships, such as the PLA fighter's unsafe intercepts in 2001 that caused the EP-3 incident, illustrate this uncertainty.[180] Unsafe PLA intercepts continued after 2001 and remain a problem through the present day. It is not always clear whether higher-level military or party officials authorize the PLA aircraft and ships to engage in these unsafe behaviors, whether local PLA personnel are engaging in unauthorized initiative, or whether senior leaders provide ambiguous guidance that enables lower-level actors to engage in unsafe practices without directly violating orders. Some within the Chinese military have suggested that risky intercepts are authorized in a sense because they constitute "training opportunities" for PLA forces to practice near real U.S. forces.[181] In other cases, such as during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, examples of unauthorized initiative are clearer cut. Some PLA commanders at the time would launch unapproved offensives to achieve local victories, which disrupted broader operational plans.[182]

When situations do go awry because of local unauthorized initiative, a common response in the Chinese system is a knee-jerk reaction to cover up the issue, reflecting the politicization challenge discussed in the information building block. The aforementioned response to the 2001 EP-3 incident provides one example, and Beijing's abrupt end to its zero-COVID policy in late 2022 provides another. In 2022, local governments and the central government faced increasing backlash from people over the central government's zero-COVID policies and mounting economic pressure.[183] Local governments struggled to understand the central government's intentions and began lifting restrictions proactively, which created momentum that added pressure on the central government to follow through and end the zero-COVID policy.[184]

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[179] In a domestic context, China's central government may give high-level "strategic direction" and leave it up to local governments to figure out how to implement this broad guidance, partly out of a desire to benefit from policy experimentation. Another benefit of this dynamic is that the central government can either disavow lower-level officials if things fail or, if things work out, claim credit for the successes. Zhipeng Ye, Hongyi Gao, and Weixu Wu, "Local Government Capacity and Response Strategies to Central Policy Piloting Goals: A Case Study of China's New-Type Urbanization Plan," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, Vol. 11, December 2024.

[180] John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 365–368.

[181] Certain elements of the PLA, particularly Navy submarines, have been "using the enemy to train" (拿敌练兵) and thereby benefit from training against "the most genuine 'blue force.'" Chinese state media have referenced risky intercepts as a form of training since at least 2014, and this has been described as part of the PLA's drive for more realistic combat training. See Elsa B. Kania and Ian Burns McCaslin, *Learning Warfare from the Laboratory: China's Progression in Wargaming and Opposing Force Training*, Institute for the Study of War, September 2021; Ryan Martinson and Connor Kennedy, "Using the Enemy to Train the Troops—Beijing's New Approach to Prepare Its Navy for War," *China Brief*, March 25, 2022; and Chen Naili [陈乃利] and Wei Ming [卫明], "Deepen the Promotion of Actual Combat Training" ["深入推进实战化军事训练"], *PLA Daily*, February 16, 2023.

[182] Zhang, 2015.

[183] For two accounts of this decision, see Minxin Pei, "The Sudden End of Zero-Covid: An Investigation," *China Leadership Monitor*, March 2023; and Lingling Wei and Jonathan Cheng, "Why Xi Jinping Reversed His Zero-Covid Policy in China," *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2023.

[184] PRC, "Notice on Further Optimizing the Prevention and Control Measures of the New Coronavirus Pneumonia Epidemic to Ensure Scientific and Precise Prevention and Control Work," November 11, 2022.

In sum, the distribution of authorities matters in shaping how China's national security decisionmaking works in practice. China's national security decisionmaking is highly centralized compared with that of most countries, with Xi having established significant control over the system. However, in practice, Xi cannot make every decision all the time. At lower levels, such as theater commands and on the tactical edge, informal authorities and the potential for unauthorized initiative start to matter more. Although it is important to highlight Xi's centralization of power, understanding China's national security decisionmaking requires appreciating that not every PRC action is the deliberate result of carefully managed and controlled decisionmaking that Xi personally oversees.

In the U.S.-China context, unauthorized initiative can undermine crisis management because it can make it difficult to determine whether lower-level actors are necessarily behaving in ways that reflect the preferences and decisions of senior leaders. For example, if Chinese aircraft engage in unsafe intercepts during a crisis and another crash occurs similar to the EP-3 incident, U.S. policymakers could potentially conclude that the PRC government was engaging in deliberately provocative behaviors even if senior Chinese leaders had not authorized the actions.

Key Patterns and Trends

After applying this framework to China's system and reviewing historical cases of Chinese national security decisions and crises, we identified several patterns and trends below. Table 3 summarizes the key historical examples we identified for each part of the framework and the insights they offer on China's national security decisionmaking system.

Table 3. Summary of Historical Cases

Building Block	Challenge	Historical Case	Key Insight from Case
Information	Incomplete	1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis	Senior PRC leaders sometimes have key gaps in their awareness of a rival's potential actions or reactions.
		2011 J-20 flight test	Information is not always shared seamlessly and coordinated across different parts of the PRC government.
	Inaccurate	2019–2020 COVID-19 response	Lower-level PRC actors sometimes deliberately provide false information to superiors.
Analysis	Cognitive biases	2020 October Surprise crisis	PRC leaders can make worst-case inferences from unconnected and inconsequential facts because of such challenges as mirror imaging and confirmation bias.

Building Block	Challenge	Historical Case	Key Insight from Case
		1999 Belgrade bombing	PRC leaders exhibit chronic distrust of the United States and often assume deliberate and malicious intent behind even accidental U.S. actions.
		2022 Pelosi visit	Biases, such as mirror-imaging, can impede effective communication between PRC and U.S. leaders.
	Organizational influences	2007 ASAT test	PRC military-civilian divides may exist, with each side having different perspectives on the benefits and risks of different actions or policies.
	Emotional influences	China's space program	PRC leaders value global status and symbolism associated with leadership.
		China's territorial disputes	PRC's narrative of national rejuvenation and status reinforce the importance of defending territorial claims.
Authorities	Formal	Default approach	PRC decisionmaking can follow official processes.
	Informal	1979 invasion of Vietnam	Senior PRC leaders can exert personal influence to cut cross formal lines of authority.
	Unauthorized	2001 EP-3 incident	Lower-level PRC actors may sometimes take actions that PRC superiors did not intend or explicitly authorize.
		1979 invasion of Vietnam	Some PRC commanders launched unapproved offensives that disrupted broader operational plans.

There Is Significant Uncertainty Surrounding China's National Security Decisionmaking

Outside observers should not assume they have a clear or comprehensive understanding of China's national security decisionmaking process, especially in real time during a crisis or conflict. China's opaque and autocratic system produces incentives to conceal information about its decisionmaking for both strategic and domestic political reasons. Even with the benefit of hindsight, it can be difficult to confidently identify how and why China made certain decisions historically. This problem is not unique to China: Even in some of the most studied cases in history, such as the July Crisis preceding World War I, historians with full access to declassified records still debate why leaders made the decisions that they did.[185] But it does serve as a reminder that looking into the Chinese system can be particularly difficult, and policymakers should not assume they will have the kind of real-time clarity in future crises or conflicts that their predecessors have regularly lacked throughout history.

Compounding the baseline difficulty is that external observers face their own information limitations and analytic biases, which create challenges for their ability to accurately understand China's decisionmaking. In a foreign policy crisis, there may be some basic objective reality about what is happening, but this is filtered through China's perceptions and then again through the perceptions of foreign analysts trying to understand China's perceptions—each layer introducing potential distortions. This process, akin to making photocopies of copies, makes accurately grasping how China views a situation especially difficult in real time.

The goal of this paper's framework is to reduce the extent of this uncertainty and thereby reduce U.S. misperceptions about Chinese decisionmaking. But one element of hedging against U.S. misperceptions is encouraging policymakers and analysts to have realistic levels of confidence about their ability to understand and predict China's decisions.

Bottom line: U.S. policymakers should assume that their own information and insights on China's decisionmaking are limited and imperfect, especially in real-time situations, such as ongoing crises or conflicts.

China's Informational Picture in Past Crises Often Appears Clouded and Politicized

Like many countries, China regularly struggles to gain a clear and complete understanding of key national security developments. But the scale of information distortions in China are notable, and politicization is a particularly large problem. Lower-level actors regularly fail to pass information up the chain of command because they fear the consequences of sharing bad news, or they share inaccurate information to game the system in search of rewards. If lower-level Chinese actors worry that there will be negative consequences for sharing certain information, they might hold onto that information for as long as possible before sharing it, creating delays in senior Chinese decisionmakers' understanding of key events. Sharing falsified information might also create confusion for senior decisionmakers, who might take actions based on the incorrect belief they have a firm grasp on key

[185] Keir Lieber, "The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2007.

developments or the effectiveness of their past foreign policy responses. As a result, senior leaders may regularly have gaps in their situational awareness from withheld information or an incorrect assessment of a situation because inaccurate information was shared instead.

The challenges China faces in developing a complete and accurate informational picture can make managing escalation during crises or conflicts more difficult. If senior Chinese leaders do not receive timely and accurate information from their subordinates, misperceptions are more likely. For example, senior Chinese leaders may not learn about certain U.S. actions designed to communicate resolve during a crisis, or they may receive falsified reports about the effectiveness of their own actions in deterring the United States or influencing U.S. perceptions because their subordinates feel pressure to report good news regardless of the objective reality. If escalation management is partly about careful communication and choreography during a crisis, having a rival's senior leaders operate in an information echo chamber could fuel misperceptions and require more careful planning to determine the benefits and risks of different U.S. responses.

Bottom line: U.S. policymakers should not assume that information that enters the Chinese system will necessarily reach senior decisionmakers because key information may spread through the Chinese system slowly with varying degrees of accuracy.

China's Analytic Tendencies Contribute to Chronic Misperceptions of U.S. Intentions

China's decisionmaking system exhibits consistent misperceptions about U.S. intentions and misunderstandings of the messages that the United States is trying to convey. If China regularly fails to understand the signals that the United States is sending, that will shape its decisions in ways that run counter to U.S. interests, including efforts to de-escalate crises or conflicts.

Chinese leaders have recurringly adopted a worst-case lens in their interpretations of U.S. intentions, which they believe include a desire for regime change that threatens the CCP's survival. China regularly interprets U.S. policies through this worst-case lens, often viewing U.S. actions as deliberate and coordinated efforts to threaten China's vital interests even when such actions are accidental, decentralized, or in service of other goals. Part of this worst-case interpretation of U.S. intentions may stem from China's problems with information streams, but analytical problems, such as mirror-imaging, appear to reinforce and compound these informational problems.

Beijing's foreign policy actions are also often influenced by deep-seated fears. Chinese leaders fixate on threats to domestic instability resulting from challenges to CCP legitimacy and on threats to their international status, drawing associations with the "Century of Humiliation." Fears of political instability heavily influenced Deng Xiaoping's decision to violently suppress the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989—with fresh memory of the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and observing the upheaval in Eastern Europe at the time.[186] Strong emotional reactions may drive China to take risks in future crises or conflicts as well, with disputes such as those involving Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands involving more than just purely material calculations about controlling a piece of physical territory.

[186] Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link, eds., compiled by Zhang Liang, *The Tiananmen Papers: The Chinese Leadership's Decision to Use Force Against Their Own People—in Their Own Words*, PublicAffairs, 2001; Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, Harvard University Press, 2013.

Emotional factors, such as pride, shame, and fear, are often intertwined with strategic calculations and can make foreign policy decisions harder to anticipate and escalation harder to control.

Bottom line: U.S. policymakers should assume that Chinese leaders will enter future crises with a worst-case lens in interpreting U.S. intentions and actions, so they should calibrate U.S. responses knowing that China might interpret them in this light.

China's Decisionmaking Is Less Centralized Than Some U.S. Commentators Assume

Although the prevailing view in the United States is that China has an overwhelmingly centralized decisionmaking structure in which Xi controls every decision, it is easy to exaggerate the extent of centralization. Major national security decisions do run through Xi, but not everything runs through Xi all the time.[187] Priority issues, such as U.S.-China trade negotiations, involve highly centralized decisionmaking, with top CCP leaders, such as Xi, directly shaping policy.[188] Secondary concerns, such as the management and implementation of broad directives from the leadership, i.e., routine diplomatic or military exchanges, appear to be handled in a more decentralized manner, involving greater latitude for the ministries and more opportunities for lower-level organizations, including provincial governments, to play a role.[189]

This tendency to view rivals as having highly centralized decisionmaking risks overstating the level of coordination in China's interagency process. As such examples as the 2011 J-20 flight test illustrate, the PRC system may not always seamlessly share information and coordinate activities in advance. PLA researchers have written about concerns that the quality and efficiency of joint operations could be inhibited by poor information flow during the decisionmaking process.[190] Just as China should not assume perfect alignment among U.S. agencies, U.S. analysts should not assume that China's interagency mechanisms function seamlessly or according to a unified design.[191]

Finally, there is an important distinction between proactive decisionmaking and planned actions and reactive decisionmaking during crises. If China is considering taking an action in advance, that provides the time and attention for senior leaders to consider the issues in depth and make decisions at the highest levels of government. In crises, Chinese decisionmaking may necessarily be more reactive, especially to unforeseen events or rapidly unfolding situations. These situations can require lower-level actors to make quick decisions without having time to socialize them with senior leaders in advance.

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[187] Peter Mattis, Arran Hope, Matthew Johnson, and Peace Ajirotutu, "Divergent Implications for Xi's Power from New Party Regulations," *China Brief Notes*, July 2, 2025.

[188] Bob Davis and Lingling Wei, *Superpower Showdown: How the Battle Between Trump and Xi Threatens a New Cold War*, HarperCollins, 2020.

[189] Lu Ning, "The Central Leadership, Supraministry Coordinating Bodies, State Council Ministries, and Party Departments," in David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform, 1978–2000*, Stanford University Press, 2001; Jakobson and Knox, 2010; Wong, 2018.

[190] Yuan He [袁禾], Liu Yang [刘洋], and Sun Jie [孙杰], "Research on the Analysis of Biases in Decision-Making in Joint Operations Command Training for Command Personnel" ["面向指挥员训练的联合作战指挥决策偏差分析研究"], *Military Operations Research and Assessment* [军事运筹与评估], Vol. 37, No. 5, December 2022.

[191] Jervis, 1976.

Bottom line: U.S. actions should be multilevel and specifically engage the distinct actors within the CCP and the PLA, recognizing that decisionmaking can sometimes be decentralized and fragmented, particularly during unplanned events.

China's Decisionmaking Process Is Constantly Evolving

China's decisionmaking process is evolving as leaders learn from past crises and adapt to new security challenges and advances in military technology. Learning from various crises in the 1990s and 2000s, China has made progress toward improving coordination challenges among party, state, and military institutions. After the 2001 EP-3 incident, a review by a Chinese think tank identified the lack of mechanisms for comprehensive intelligence-processing as hindering effective senior leader decisionmaking, and it highlighted the U.S. National Security Council's role in facilitating the U.S. response to the crisis.[192] China subsequently established its CNSC in 2013, noting the influence of the U.S. National Security Council in its decision to do so, but China adopted the institution for its own needs and it is very difficult to determine from afar whether the CNSC is delivering on its mission, especially because it has held only four publicly reported meetings.[193] This highlights the importance for U.S. analysts of avoiding mirror-imaging and equating organizational structures, such as the CNSC, with their Western counterparts in terms of function or effectiveness. In a 2024 report, the Central Committee of the CCP called for "strengthening the national security coordination mechanism" and improving "strategic, policy, and risk monitoring and early warning systems."[194] The document repeatedly mentions enhancements to coordination, suggesting a possible underlying concern that Chinese decisionmakers are still not yet operating in a fully integrated or cooperative manner.

More-significant changes to China's decisionmaking system could occur after Xi leaves office. Under Xi, China's national security bureaucracies have undergone significant reforms, including more centralized authority for the paramount leader, widespread military overhauls, and the elevation of the MSS in the broader PRC intelligence community. Future leaders might reinforce these trends, especially in preserving tightened centralized control, but their own preferences, level of political power, and personal networks might cause other elements of the national security bureaucracy to evolve in unpredictable ways.[195]

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[192] Yang Mingjie [杨明杰], ed., *Introduction to International Crisis Management* [国际危机管理概论], Current Affairs Press [时事出版社], 2003, p. 253, as cited in Jost, 2023b. The review also noted that the central government should coordinate "departments directly affected by the crisis [the military]" to ensure that "organizational biases" do not undermine the overall situation.

[193] Zhao Kejin, "China's National Security Commission," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 14, 2015; Joel Wuthnow, "China's Much-Heralded NSC Has Disappeared," *Foreign Policy*, June 30, 2016; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "National Security After China's 20th Party Congress: Trends in Discourse and Policy," *China Leadership Monitor*, Fall 2023; Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers, "In Turbulent Times, Xi Builds a Security Fortress for China, and Himself," *New York Times*, August 6, 2022.

[194] Central Committee of the Communist Party of China [中共中央], "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reform and Advancing Chinese Modernization" ["中共中央关于进一步全面深化改革推进中国式现代化的决定"], Xinhua [新华社], July 21, 2024.

[195] This has been the case with other paramount leaders, including Xi's two recent predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

Bottom line: U.S. policymakers should track the evolution of the Chinese decisionmaking system over time to account for learning and evolution, and they should regularly revisit assumptions about how it works, particularly after leadership changes, crises, or other major events during which the Chinese might implement reforms based on lessons learned.

Conclusion

Our framework focuses on three foundational building blocks that underpin China's national security decisionmaking system: information, analysis, and authorities. The framework helps orient U.S. policymakers and analysts to think about what China's informational picture looks like, how Chinese decisionmakers tend to think about their environment, and who in the PRC has the authority to make which kinds of decisions. This approach enables a structured examination of the informational environment available to Chinese decisionmakers, the analytical processes through which Chinese leaders interpret this information, and the distribution of authority across different actors and institutions within the PRC.

Understanding China's national security decisionmaking processes is essential for developing effective U.S. policies. Persistent misperceptions in the U.S. national security decisionmaking system about China's worldview and motivations can lead the United States to adopt strategies and policies that are counterproductive to achieving its goals.

The framework has important implications for understanding PRC decisionmaking and determining U.S. responses during a crisis or a conflict. Distinguishing between the three building blocks and understanding potential distortions in the PRC system can sharpen U.S. policymakers' thinking about how to communicate effectively with their Chinese counterparts. For example, taking an action that is purpose-built to message a particular leader may not work well if lower-level actors distort information streams and withhold bad news from the leader. U.S. policymakers cannot assume that just because information penetrates or percolates into the Chinese system, it will actually reach the right Chinese decisionmakers.

Although this paper focuses on challenges and flaws in China's decisionmaking process, the system also has strengths. These include policy coordination and execution, long-term planning, and an increasingly professional military. The Chinese government has also developed methods to mitigate the extent of some weaknesses, such as the *neican* reporting channels, to help bypass the limitations and constraints that the censorship system creates.

Therefore, U.S. policymakers should not interpret the challenges China faces as meaning that China's decisionmaking is always haphazard and dysfunctional or that Chinese foreign policy actions are fundamentally irrational and unpredictable. The Chinese government often does make foreign policy decisions based on reasonably careful calculations about national power and how it conceives of its domestic and international interests. This paper simply highlights that China's decisionmaking, like that of all countries, is imperfect and sometimes deviates from what outside observers may expect. It is often the limitations of a system, not its strengths, that can lead to unpredictable and dangerous decisions, therefore requiring dedicated attention.

This analysis has implications for escalation management. During historical crises and conflicts, states have often relied on threats or uses of force to impose costs on a competitor in a bid to coerce

the rival into backing down. In potential U.S.-China crises or conflicts in the future, one challenge to relying on cost imposition will be finding a "Goldilocks zone" where either side can impose sufficient pain on the other's sensitive pressure points that it causes the target to back down but not so much pain that it causes the target to escalate in retaliation.[196] Identifying this sweet spot with confidence in advance has been very difficult historically, and the conclusions here suggest that U.S. policymakers should be wary about their ability to predict how exactly the PRC would respond to U.S. actions in the future.[197] One aspect of better understanding the PRC's national security decisionmaking system is gaining an appropriate level of humility about how confident the United States can be in forecasting PRC responses to U.S. actions.

[196] Jacob L. Heim, Zachary Burdette, and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *U.S. Military Theories of Victory for a War with the People's Republic of China*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1743-1, February 2024.

[197] Evans et al., 2024.

Abbreviations

ASAT	anti-satellite
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMC	Central Military Commission
CNSC	Central National Security Commission
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
LSG	leading small group
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MND	Ministry of National Defense
MSS	Ministry of State Security
NPC	National People's Congress
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SSF	Strategic Support Force

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About the Authors

Zachary Burdette is an associate political scientist at RAND. His research focuses on strategy, military analysis, and technology. He has a Ph.D. in political science.

Shanshan Mei is a political scientist at RAND specializing in Chinese defense policy and Indo-Pacific security. She has a Ph.D. in international relations.

Elizabeth Bujwid is a defense analyst at RAND. Her research interests include Indo-Pacific security, People's Liberation Army training and modernization, and emerging technology. She has an M.A. in security studies.

Ian Burns McCaslin was a summer associate at RAND. His research interests include the Chinese military, Chinese history, Chinese public health, and U.S. relations in the Indo-Pacific. He is a Ph.D. candidate in international relations.

Libby Weaver is a Chinese language specialist research assistant at RAND. Her research focuses on China's security and strategic developments. She holds a B.A. in international law and institutions and East Asian languages and cultures.

Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga is a senior policy researcher at RAND. His focus at RAND is on Asian security issues. He has an M.S. and an M.A. in international affairs.

Kristen Gunness is associate research department director, Defense and Political Sciences Department at RAND; a senior policy researcher at RAND; and a professor of policy analysis at the RAND School of Public Policy.