

**ELEVATING XI JINPING TO THE “CORE”
OF CHINESE LEADERSHIP**

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Executive Summary

1. Since assuming office as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in late 2012, Xi Jinping has been a powerful driving force behind Chinese politics. In recent months, however, he has become a controversial and divisive figure both at home and abroad with regard to the direction he is taking China.
2. The most recent development that unnerves people is what appears to be a concerted effort to “canonise” Xi as a paramount leader beyond reproach.
3. The “canonisation” of Xi is three-pronged. The first is the call for absolute loyalty to him from all party members; the second is the demand for all cadres to “stay highly aligned” with Xi’s policies and political line; and third is the promotion of Xi to the “core” of the Chinese top leadership, i.e. the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC).
4. The concept of a leadership “core” (*hexin*) was invented by Deng Xiaoping who wanted to avoid another Mao-style dictatorship while recognising the necessity of a first among equals for the smooth functioning of the team. Deng designated Jiang Zemin as the “core” of the third generation CCP leadership but Jiang did not pass that title to his successor Hu Jintao.
5. Xi’s effort to upgrade himself to the “core” status symbolises his quest for personal power on top of the institutional power he has already amassed. The quest is prompted by complicated factors.
6. This can be regarded as the natural outcome of Xi’s centralisation of power, mainly through the establishment of four major “leading small groups” on top of the existing political structure. By heading these groups he has effectively relegated other PSC members to his subordinates.
7. The quest is also necessitated by the need for comprehensive reforms. Strong power at the top is needed to overcome the vested interests.

8. It is also a response to a crisis of governance resulting from the passivity of the cadre corps demoralised by the massive, sustained anti-corruption campaign.
9. Xi's pursuit of the "core" status will liquidate the lingering influence of the previous "core" of Jiang Zemin who had hamstrung the entire Hu Jintao administration. Even Xi's PSC is staffed by Jiang's protégés.
10. The drive to "canonise" Xi Jinping is also indicative of intensifying power struggle at the top. Xi has recently repeatedly alluded to the botched coup attempt by Zhou Yongkang, Bo Xilai, Ling Jihua, Xu Caihou etc. and emphasised loyalty as the basic requirement of cadres.
11. Demanding loyalty betrays Xi's sense of vulnerability, especially after a series of failed economic policy since mid-2015. Time has changed; personality cult is unlikely to grant Xi the immunity Mao enjoyed.
12. President Xi's roll back of many liberalising reforms set in motion by his predecessors indicates that the institutionalisation of the political reforms since Deng Xiaoping is weak and at least partially reversible.