



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Decision making and dissent in the Chinese Communist Party

Description: China's Communist Party is known to prize loyalty and conformity among its more than 90 million members. If good policies are forged through deliberation and debate, how does the CCP handle the weighing of opinions, counterproposals and objections while ensuring ideological purity? And how does a party member of good will conscientiously object? Dr Chris Buckley, chief China correspondent for The New York Times, examines decision-making and dissent in the Party with presenter Ali Moore.

Listen: <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode?id=959252>

Voiceover:

The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Chris Buckley:

In a country like China where the Communist Party claims omnipotence, claims to be in full charge even when it's not always in full charge, that means that you can get this paradox where people are going to blame the top leaders for a problem that may actually have much more complex roots. It's a tangle that leaders in China, in Beijing, create for themselves. If you're going to claim credit for all of China's successes, then people are going to look at you when things go wrong as well.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, decision making and dissent in the Chinese Communist Party.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

It's no secret that the Chinese Communist Party or CCP shows little leniency towards opposition from ordinary citizens. And those who dare to publicly take issue with the party or its policies often find themselves in hot water or worse, but what if dissent or disagreement from within the party? The CCP is known to prize loyalty and conformity among its more than 90 million members, including from those who make up the leadership ranks across national, provincial and regional tiers. So if good governance and sound policy making are born of lengthy deliberation and debate, what room is there inside the CCP for the messy and often contentious weighing up of wide ranging opinions, counter proposals and objections?

In this episode of Ear to Asia, we ask how policy decisions are arrived at in the CCP. And how much of what poses for deliberation is mere window dressing? How does the party ensure loyalty and conformity among the rank and file and iron out differences within? And how does a party member of goodwill conscientiously object? Joining us to examine decision making and dissent in the Chinese Communist Party is Dr. Chris Buckley who earned a Doctorate in China Studies from the ANU and has for decades been reporting on China for the last 10 years for the New York Times. His coverage is included politics, foreign policy, rural issues, human rights, the environment and climate change. Welcome to Ear to Asia, Chris.

Chris Buckley:

Pleased to join you, Ali.

Ali Moore:

I guess the really obvious first question is, how much do we know about how the CCP works internally when it comes to decision making and the formulation of policy?

Chris Buckley:

Well, I guess the honest answer is that many parts of decision making, especially at the very top of the party are veiled in secrecy. The Chinese Communist Party sees itself as a custodian of China's rise in the world. It sees itself as navigating China and trying to preserve power in an uncertain and often hostile world. And so secrecy is almost ingrained in how the party works. They don't like to show the rest of the world how decisions are made and what the disagreements are. And I think that secrecy is probably magnified under Xi Jinping over the past 10 years, when powers become more centralised, when the scope of public discussion that you saw in China has shrunk, I think that's been the big change under Xi Jinping. Now that said, it's not as if the Chinese Communist Party can carry out all of its decision making in complete secrecy.

So we do get insights into how policy is made. And in particular, I think it's important to remember that the Chinese Communist Party is in important ways of propaganda state. It sends out its messages. It mobilises people. It mobilises officials by sending out messages, directives, slogans through official newspapers like the People's Daily, through CCTV television and so on. It has to broadcast its intentions to the world. So in that sense, we can also get some insights into what's going on, and also sometimes into disagreements in the party by how propaganda is being handled or mishandled.

Ali Moore:

I want to explore those insights in just a minute. But first, when we look at that secrecy, Chris, if I was a member of the party, would I have a better understanding of the policy making process?

Chris Buckley:

I'm sure you would. And at the same time, the Chinese Communist Party is an enormous organisation. It's over 90 million members now, 95 I believe is the latest count. And so it's almost a nation within a nation. And within the party, of course, there's different tiers of seniority. And obviously enough, the higher you are in the pecking order, the more insight you'll get into how the top leaders, particularly Xi Jinping and his inner circle are making decisions. Now that said, my impression is that it's often the case that even mid-ranking officials or even higher in the party may not have a direct window into how power and decision making are working at the very top of the party.

I think people who have worked in China, spent time, occasionally dealing with officials, sometimes speaking to them in private, realise that they also have an insatiable appetite for rumours and speculation about what is going on at the top of the party. They might not understand what Xi Jinping is thinking and saying and what the latest power moves are. So they also have this hunger for information about what their direct bosses are up to.

Ali Moore:

And how much of that opaqueness do you think is deliberate and how much is just the fact that it is so vast and so all pervasive and has so many members that a little bit of confusion is not surprising?

Chris Buckley:

Yeah. So I tend to think probably the answer to that question like a lot of these questions probably falls in the middle somewhere. So a combination of intention, but also unintentional outcomes of trying to run

such a large, complicated bureaucracy, in charge of such a large complicated country. I do think it's probably true that there's a sort of a calculated aspect to the ambiguity or opacity that you sometimes see in, for example, Xi Jinping speeches, or the new slogans that come out of the Communist Party as well. Propaganda, as I've said, is very important in mobilising officials in setting them in a particular direction, but at the same time, it's often true that leaders don't like to box themselves in. And so therefore a particular directive or slogan will in a sense, be inherently ambiguous or open to different interpretations, which allows them to shift tack as needed.

One recent example I could think of. Xi Jinping has announced that into the coming decade and beyond, the focus of economic priorities will be this programme of so called common prosperity. Now that means obviously enough bringing more prosperity and opportunity to more Chinese people, but that's also a very broad idea as well. And you can see there's plenty of room for adjustment when it comes to the pace and ambitions and focus of that programme. And I think that's almost intentional. Xi Jinping and the other leaders don't want to lock themselves in for what is sure to be a very complicated process.

Ali Moore:

So if we go through what we do know the sort of the nutshell version, if you like, of the party hierarchy on paper and then in reality. We start with that party membership, as you said, the latest estimates around 95 million people, take us through what happens next in terms of the hierarchy.

Chris Buckley:

Probably the best way to start thinking about the hierarchy is at the very top of the party ever since its revolutionary era, the Chinese Communist Party has been a strongly Leninist party in which obedience to the central leadership, in particular to the top leaders really ingrained as part of the party's political culture. And so at the very top of the party, formally speaking, you have the party general secretary. At the moment, Xi Jinping, who preside over the Politburo Standing Committee. So that is a very small circle, currently seven members, all of the men who meet regularly in Beijing to decide on the issues of the day. Immediately below that is the Politburo, the full Politburo, which is a slightly larger council that meets less regularly and doesn't necessarily deal with the issues day to day. The Politburo currently has 25 members.

So again, it's a very small circle of people. Most of them are central officials with a mixture of provincial level leaders mixed in. Now there's a number of other bureaucracies attached to the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee, but the next important tier in the party is the Central Committee. Now the Central Committee meets roughly once a year. So it's like an annual meeting of a grand council of officials. And its current full membership is slightly over 200, I think. And on top of that, stretching my memory here, but there's over 150 auxiliary non-voting members who get to sit in, but not vote on its deliberations. So that meets about once a year. And that sort of sets the general direction of policy, gives approval to broad documents setting out the priorities for the Communist Party and the Chinese government, and extremely importantly, it also every five years elects a new Politburo and a new Politburo Standing Committee and its leaders as well, including the party general secretary.

So probably its most important role is every five years when a party Congress is held, a Central Committee will be elected from that Congress. And that Central Committee in turn will then elect the next party leadership. So looking toward the end of this year, 2022, there's going to be a lot of focus on the next party Congress. And again, as I said there, the big focus will be on the new Central Committee, which emerges from that. And then the new party leadership, which emerges from a vote of the Central Committee. Now below that, we have all sorts of layers of party bureaucracy. Probably the most important layers are the ministerial officials in Beijing and also the provincial level leaders out in the provinces, whether that's big cities like Shanghai or Shenzhen, or big provinces like Hubei or Sichuan and so on. They're the next layer.

And below that, way down below, right down to the villages of China, you have 95 million members. And they don't exercise a lot of power on their own, but they're actually quite important because I think one important dimension of how power works in China is that the Communist Party hierarchy is very important in implementing policy right down to the grassroots, right down to neighbourhoods, right down to villages. And as we've seen in COVID, very important in enforcing the lockdowns across China.

Ali Moore:

So if we look at some of those different layers more closely, the Central Committee, for example, as you say, they have the very important role of electing the next party leadership. Is electing a loose word there?

Chris Buckley:

Electing is a very loose word there. Again, China is a very centralised system. And so although there may be some room for horse-trading, contention, bargaining on the margins of the process, ultimately it's the top leaders, the inner circle of most powerful officials who will be deciding who's on the candidate's list, who goes up, who goes down. And again, back to your initial question about secrecy in leadership, Ali, the fact is that how this process of bargaining works within the top leadership is something that outsiders really don't have a good handle on. We can look for clues in public announcements and occasional rumours or inside leaks from inside the party leadership, but they'd become much less common than in previous decades. And so therefore in many respects, Chinese politics is a black box.

Ali Moore:

And when you look at the Politburo Standing Committee, and to a lesser extent, I guess the wider Politburo with the current 25 members, are they made up of policy experts at all? And by experts, I mean, if I look at the Australian system, for example, or the British system where we have a minister of the environment or a minister for any number of various policy areas. Do they define policy areas at that level of the government structure?

Chris Buckley:

They do, in some sense. It's not as if it's a strict division of labour in which the Politburo has to have X member who's in charge of say foreign policy or the environment or women's affairs and so on. But again, the fact is that China's an extremely large and complicated country. So almost naturally what you do get in the Politburo is a mixture of backgrounds and expertise. And some people are in there at least in large part because of their background in a particular area of policy. And that can be economic policy making, for example, or it can be other areas such as public security, for example. And so I do think it's generally true that what you do see in the Politburo, and to some extent, in the standing committee as well is a mixture of people who are chosen partly because of their loyalty to the leader, but also partly because of their functional expertise as well.

The fact that they have experience in a particular area of government and they can contribute to the policy making process through that expertise. Now there's going to be a great deal of politics that goes into which policy expert goes up to the very top. But nonetheless, I think it's generally true that if you look at the officials in these areas of particular expertise who do make it into the Politburo, they're well qualified people. Here on in thinking in particular of Liu He, the Vice Premier who's been very important in advising Chinese leaders on domestic economic policy and also trade issues, most particularly with the United States, somebody who's had decades of experience in economic policy making. Yang Jiechi, the Politburo member who has been in charge of foreign policy for the past five years. Again, somebody whose expertise in foreign policy wasn't plopped on them simply a few years ago because back decades and decades. I think what you do find is that Chinese leaders, although of course they do have their favourites in politics, also do need particular leaders who have that depth of expertise in a particular area.

Ali Moore:

So particularly given that, how much room is there within the party and at those higher levels for real debate on national policy issues?

Chris Buckley:

Oh Ali, I'd feel a fool if I tried giving you a definitive answer to that question, because as I said, Chinese politics can be such a secretive process and there's whole realms of policy making, which are incredibly

complicated as well. Now that caveat aside, I do think what we do see is that Chinese politics, the Chinese government, the Chinese economy now deals with a number of issues, which are intrinsically very complicated and almost intrinsically mean that the party leadership has to draw on reservoirs of expertise outside of its immediate grasp. Here I'm thinking of areas like climate change policy, for example, and related issues of energy policy. Now Chinese leaders can develop their general goals about what they'd want to do in reducing dioxide emissions, for example. But when it comes to making particular choices about how much coal the Chinese economy needs to consume, how quickly the Chinese economy can begin drawing down coal consumption, those issues are ones where you need to draw on expertise.

And therefore, I do think you find these areas of policy making in China, where there almost has to be more room for debate because there's more uncertainty about what the right choices are for China. And I think again, in areas of environment and climate policy, even in economic policy these days, you do see that there's more room, not necessarily for full-throated disputes between different arms of the government, although you sometimes do see that, but certainly for sort of more muted debate about where the priorities would lie. And so I think one part of trying to report on China, trying to understand policy making China if you're an investor or a government official, is trying to understand how those debates unfold, who the important voices are, who the important institutions are, and who ultimately is going to be making the decisions in those areas.

Ali Moore:

And I imagine that is quite the task.

Chris Buckley:

It's quite the task. And it's also a task that's been changing over the past decade under Xi Jinping. And I think one important change that people have witnessed is that, of course the Communist Party's always been important in policy making in China, but in previous decades, it tended to be the case that the Communist Party leadership felt that it could and should give more room to the civilian government, not the party itself, but to the civilian government in Beijing and in the provinces in making policy, in designing policy choices, and in setting the agenda for the Chinese economy, environment and so on. And so what you did find is that there seemed to be a kind of, not a strict division of labour between the party and the government, but more distinction between their roles. And there tended to be more of a role for the government as a particular area of expertise and policy making.

That's been changing pretty markedly under Xi Jinping. He felt that this system was creating disfunction, inefficiencies in government, and also disloyalty and conflict as well. So there's been a much greater emphasis on the party assuming a much bigger role in policy making, setting the agenda. And so what we've seen is the emergence and rising strength of so-called party leading small groups, which are not entirely setting aside the government decision making process, but certainly dominating it and setting the agenda when it comes to questions of changes in the Chinese economy, environment, policing and so on. I think what we've seen there is a shift in the centre of gravity in policy toward these party institutions. And that ultimately means a shift in the centre of gravity towards Xi Jinping himself at the moment.

Ali Moore:

And when you talk there about that perception, that it allows room for disloyalty, understanding the limitations on what we really do know, but when it comes to disagreements, normal policy debate, dissent versus non-conformity going to disloyalty, is it always clear where the lines are between those things or are they considered one and the same as a failure to conform tantamount to dissent?

Chris Buckley:

I think it's natural that there's going to be a spectrum of opinion within China, within the party on any number of issues. Now that doesn't mean that there's this whole block of officials inside the party who for example, are working for Western style democracy or something like that. But nonetheless, there's officials who come to the table with different values, different forms of experience, different ideas about where

China should be headed. And so therefore you are going to get debate within the party, even if these days we can't see very clearly into those debates, and even if these days the scope for debate is much more restricted than before. Now that said, I do think there's another dimension of this as well, which is I think sometimes officials in China have to grapple with not only the demands of where policy should be headed, but also uncertainties about policy as well. Xi Jinping is an extremely powerful leader. He's a very dominating leader in many ways.

He's a leader who sends out different messages about what his priorities are. Sometimes those messages can come into contradiction with each other. And officials have to juggle those priorities in a way that can be very messy for them. I'm thinking when it comes to economic policy, for example, Xi Jinping, for example, has enunciated this year is a year in which economic stability is an absolute priority for China. Okay. But the Chinese leadership has also said that controlling local government debt and that bringing down risk within the financial sector is also a priority. So how do you juggle those priorities? How do you juggle keeping aloft economic growth while also coming under pressure to control debt and to ensure that property companies, for example, aren't getting out of control? You could go through all different areas of policy making in China, and you can see how officials are dealing with sometimes very mixed signals from the top about what the priorities are. And it's in those particular areas that I sometimes think that you find there's more debate about where China should be headed.

And sometimes frankly the Chinese party leadership can be proverbially scratching its head about what to do about a problem. And also there too, I do think you did tend to find more debate. And the example that comes immediately to mind is the Chinese government's desire to encourage families after decades of strictly enforcing a one child policy restriction in Chinese cities, encouraging families to have two, three, perhaps even more children ultimately. That hasn't been working so far. Birth rates across China, particularly in Chinese cities have not been rising markedly or not at all, despite the lifting of the one child limit. And in the sense Chinese policy makers are scratching their head there like, what do we do? We've tried encouraging more children and it's not working so far. So I think there too, despite all of the restrictions of the Xi Jinping era, you do see interesting discussion in China, interesting contention sometimes about just what the Chinese government should have done and should be doing now to deal with a problem like that.

Ali Moore:

And as local officials and higher up officials grapple with some of those conundrums that I guess face governments in every country, are there factions within the party that help officials form their view? It would be extraordinary, wouldn't it, if there wasn't given the size of the party?

Chris Buckley:

Again, coming back to this black box metaphor for Chinese politics, you'll certainly find a good number of people inside China and experts outside who take very different views about the role of factions in Chinese politics. And certainly in the past, there's been a strong tendency in China to put labels on particular leaders as belonging to particular set factions. And people would talk about the faction under Jiang Zemin, who emerged as leader in China during the 1990s up until the early 2000s. Or there was a so-called Chinese Youth League faction, which was supposed to be a group of officials, which emerged from the youth wing of the Chinese Communist Party and shared common background, common way of rising through the hierarchy, and in some ways, common values as well. Now I've said supposed to, because I do think particularly these days, there should be much more questioning about the value of putting those labels on officials.

The idea that an official walks around wearing a particular hat on their head that says, I belong to X faction, I think that's probably got limited value in understanding how Chinese politics works. These days they're probably much more likely to try to affix themselves to Xi Jinping and to recreate their identity and their affiliations and their loyalty to the current leader. And instead of talking about strict factions, I think it's sometimes useful to think about particular constituencies in the party. In other words, looser networks of officials who aren't necessarily a fully formed faction, but because of their background, because of the

region of China they come from, because of their life experience or how they've risen through the party, do have a distinctive set of values or priorities, and without treating them as being in absolute opposition to say Xi Jinping. It can be useful sometimes to think about how different arms of the party, different constituencies might have priorities or ideas that differ from his.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its society's politics and cultures, it's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open-access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You can find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Ali Moore, and I'm joined by New York Times' chief China correspondent, Chris Buckley. We're talking about policy, decision, and dissent in the Chinese Communist Party.

Ali Moore:

Chris, we've talked a bit about those areas of policy, in particular where there's no clear answer and where there are discussions and debate. But if we actually look at dissent, absolute disagreements, and if I can maybe point here to the fact, for example, that the New York Times received some 400 pages of leaked internal party documents about the crackdown on the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, how does the party discipline the non-compliant?

Chris Buckley:

Actual public examples of non-compliance of dissenting like that are quite rare in China. So when they do happen, they make news. It really does catch your eye because it's such an exceptional thing to see. I haven't been in China for a couple of years now because of visa reasons. It used to be possible to talk to people there, of course, face to face. And then you would get a much closer sense of who was unhappy with policy, who was grumbling, who was dissenting in that sense. And it's certainly true that you would find people who disagreed with policy and the direction of politics in China, at least in private. And in previous years, it was easier to identify those sources of dissent within China because in a sense they were more public.

What we did see in previous decades, what we have seen actually until fairly recent years in China, is that within the broader scope of the Chinese Communist Party, there has been a group of retired officials generally on the more liberal side of the party, retired officials and there are academics, writers, journalists who associated with them who would act as a sort of conduit, in some ways, a public conduit for reflecting disagreement and debate within the Chinese Communist Party. Here, I'm thinking of in previous years, for example, there used to be a Chinese magazine called Yanhuang Chunqiu (炎黄春秋), a history magazine that also served as a platform for the views of a group of liberal leaning Chinese officials who wanted to see more political relaxation in China, ultimately perhaps some form of democratic change in the far distant future as well, but more open to the idea from more pluralistic China at least. That group of officials and writers and editors who were connected to them used to be an important platform for airing those disagreements, not necessarily the top of the party, but within the broader political establishment.

And I could cite other examples as well how in the past different areas of China, I'm thinking in particular Guangdong province, used to be an enclave for more reformist officials and newspaper journalists and other people who were connected to them who also took a different view about the direction of politics in China, and in some sense, sort of favoured a more open liberal China as well. What we have seen happening under Xi Jinping is that those pools of muted dissent or debate within the party more broadly understood have been shrinking drastically. Yanhuang Chunqiu was closed down or taken over a few years ago and is now a husk of its former self. It's now become essentially a loyalist publication that publishes nothing adventurous.

A province like Guangdong, which used to have more scope for openly airing its own views or different views on the direction of policy coming from Beijing, that has shrunk drastically as well. That means that

dissent has not disappeared entirely, but it's become much more muted. And muted to the point where it will be conversations around the dinner table in Beijing, or a discussion held among a small circle of friends within the party. That's the kind of dissent that you'll hear. And so therefore this kind of dissent under the pressures of politics at the moment is going to find it very difficult to coalesce into any form of organised opposition against Xi Jinping that could significantly shift the course of policy.

Ali Moore:

And under Xi, is it the threat of shutdown of losing a livelihood, is that the sort of mechanism that neutralises dissent, that neutralises the sorts of things that we were seeing prior to Xi?

Chris Buckley:

I think that has been an important part of it. And over recent years, party regulations on when and how party members and officials can speak out have been tightened up. And in particular, there's been a whole series of edicts against what has been called speaking rationally against the party centre, wangyi zhongyang (妄议中央) in Chinese. This idea that leaders, if they have any disagreements with their superiors should air them through very strictly managed channels within the party. So the idea that you can speak out publicly, air disagreements, dissent against top leaders, that's become much more restricted than in the past. If you do, do it, and for example, you are a former official, you're under penalty of losing your pension. And life can be very difficult for a former official if they lose all of their privileges, including their pension, healthcare and so on.

So that's a pretty intimidating penalty that can face people who were once willing to speak out on the issues of the day. I should emphasise as well, Ali, as well as facing these penalties, Chinese officials, party members, even the broader public these days are bombarded by much more intense indoctrination instruction propaganda than the past. There's much more of an emphasis on not simply avoiding saying the wrong thing, but absorbing the correct message as well. And making sure that you repeat that message, and the party leadership hopes, absorbing that message into what they call your political soul. So in other words, becoming a true believer again.

Ali Moore:

And are there parts of that message in particular that do resonate with people even beyond the party, Xi's pushed for a stronger, unified, a more confident China?

Chris Buckley:

I do think that's true. And this is one area where I think it's probably hard to fathom all of the undercurrents of opinion in China. I do think it's generally true though, that if you pick up today's People's Daily and went through it page by page and read all of the editorials and commentaries, I'm sure you'd find a lot of slogans, political formula, speeches from leaders that made no sense to the ordinary Chinese person. The five upholds, the two protects, the two establishes, whatever the key slogans of the day are. Party officials and members may have absorbed them, but to the broader public, they may mean not too much at all. And so therefore I think there's a sort of tendency among some people to think that propaganda in China, that the values of the party are sort of meaningless nonsense. And there can be an element of that.

At the same time, I think you're probably quite right in pointing to the fact that these broader narratives that the Chinese Communist Party has been very effective at selling through television, through film, on the internet can resonate with people in China. The idea that China is rising and becoming more respected in the world, that the Chinese Communist Party is protecting the population from all of these menaces emerging from abroad or still spreading abroad, such as COVID. Not everybody absorbs those messages, but I do think they have quite a lot of resonance for a lot of Chinese people who you have to remember absorbing their information, their ideas from behind a wall of censorship. So they're not receiving a full spectrum of views that would disagree with those values. And so therefore I do think it is important to understand that official message from the party leadership, yes, part of it is ridiculous slogans that will

come and go, but part of it is this narrative that I think has more of a pull on the party membership and also the broader population.

Ali Moore:

And again, within the party, when it comes to ensuring people do stay in line, what role does the apparently never ending anti-corruption drive play?

Chris Buckley:

Yes, that's an important point, Ali, and it's a very good one to raise. I did mention these ideological strictures on party members and officials now, but perhaps the one that matters most is all of these rules against corruption and in particular, the much sharper teeth that anti-corruption investigators have acquired over the past decade, which means that even if officials believe they're not breaking the law, not being corrupt, always at the back of their mind, there may be the possibility that they can be accused of a crime that can destroy their careers, destroy their families. And that's very intimidating. The other side of this is that we often talk about the party's anti-corruption investigation agency or what is now called, I believe it's called the Central Supervision Commission. We often talk about it as being the anti-corruption agency, but it's much more than that.

Chris Buckley:

The party's supervision commission, which is also a so-called disciplinary inspection commission is also in charge of policing the political views and political loyalty of party members and officials as well. So in the eyes of party leaders, I think those two problems, economic corruption and political loyalty are seen as twin things. If an official is going to be corrupt, it's more likely they're going to be politically disloyal. If you're politically dissenting from the party leadership, it's also more likely that you'll be nailed for corruption as well. So in that sense, this drive against corruption is also very much a drive for political loyalty.

Ali Moore:

And if you look at the conversation we've had so far, it's very much a picture of a very powerful, all-powerful party. So what can't the party do? What are the challenges or the limitations to its ability to drive policy or are there none?

Chris Buckley:

No, I think it's certainly true that as powerful as Xi Jinping and the Communist Party have become, they're not omnipotent and they can face policy failures. They're also trying to govern a country of 1.4 billion people, which is changing, whose values have been changing, and not all of them are going to go along with the party's messages. In particular, that population of 1.4 billion includes hundreds of millions of younger people who are not necessarily alienated from the Chinese Communist Party or its message of national pride, but also have different aspirations as well. And getting them to go along with the party's priorities, getting them to remain lastingly loyal to the Communist Party's values, I think is a great source of anxiety to Xi Jinping and other party leaders. And that's why we're seeing much more emphasis over the past couple of years, for example, on education, ensuring that education and schooling instill the right values, and ensuring that mass media and movies aren't exposing Chinese young people simply to Hollywood dreck, but also ensuring that they see their fair share of patriotic films as well.

So I think that's the source of anxiety of the leadership and the other part of that, which we touched on was policy failure as well. We can think of all sorts of different examples. The most immediate one is the early missteps of the Chinese government in the COVID pandemic. Now there's different interpretations of what happened in all those early weeks and months when COVID didn't even have a name and was little understood. But I think it's generally credible that what did happen is that experts, medical experts were raising alarms that were ignored by party officials, that weren't given the attention that certainly many Chinese people think looking back those warnings should have received. And so that's been a serious blot

on the party's record that frankly Xi Jinping and other leaders would rather not address and don't like bringing up.

Chris Buckley:

And so those policy failures don't always come to the fore, but I think it's probably true that not everybody in China is thinking about them all the time, but people who understand how policy works, who care about these things will understand for example, that there were failures and that will be in their minds as something to take into account when it comes to judging the Xi Jinping era and its successes and failures.

Ali Moore:

And indeed given the centralization of power around the president, do those policy failures sit at his feet more than they would've in the past when there wasn't such a centralization of authority?

Chris Buckley:

I think that's probably generally true. And the other phenomenon that you see in play there is that it comes back to this paradox of how China works. It's a continental size country. Things go wrong in different parts of China all the time. And the problem that Communist Party faces is that its message to the Chinese public in a sense is that, "We're in charge of this country. We're responsible for its successes."

But also implicitly, "we're also going to be responsible for its failures as well."

So what that means is that a particular problem that emerges in local provincial China, a pollution spill, for example. In another country, in another society, that might be treated as a local failure. One that comes down to the responsibility to state officials or the local governor.

Chris Buckley:

But in a country like China, where the Communist Party claims omnipotence, claims to be in full charge, even when it's not always in full charge, that means you can get this paradox where people are going to blame the top leaders for a problem that may actually have much more complex roots and may actually involve decision making and missteps that while you can trace them to Beijing, also involve local officials, competing bureaucracies, and many other different factors as well. It's a tangle of leaders in China in Beijing create for themselves. If you're going to claim credit for all of China's successes in a sense, then people are going to look at you when things go wrong as well.

Ali Moore:

I've pushed you so far. And I do understand there is a veil that you can't lift to a certain extent. But from all your experience, what are you expecting from the 20th National Congress, and I guess particularly when it comes to the next generation of leaders, this speculation that Xi may change the age limit rules beyond him?

Chris Buckley:

Yes. I have to say, Ali, it's a very humbling time to try to understand what's happening in Beijing in the very top. And I have been reporting on this and talking to other people who follow these issues very closely. And I have been struck by people with decades of experience on these issues who also feel more than any other time in recent memory that it's very difficult to make a confident guess about what to expect from the next leadership lineup. Having put that caveat before you, again, Ali, trying to size up what Xi Jinping's priorities are and how he's going to balance those with accommodating the interests of other members of the party leadership and his own desire, which I think is pretty unmistakable to continue his own influence into the future. Taking all of that into account, I guess I would be surprised if a clear successor emerges this next party congress. I think it's fairly clear that Xi Jinping wants to stay on for at least another five years.

And I also think it's fairly clear that he doesn't want to feel that his power is being crimped by having a successor in the wings that risk, not necessarily making Xi Jinping a complete lame duck leader, but at least seeing his power, his influence, his aura ebb away a little to the next leader-in-waiting. I think perhaps he probably wants to avoid that and to find a middle point in which he brings forward a cohort of promising officials, signalling to the Chinese officialdom, then to the Chinese public, to the wider world, that there is some sort of succession plan in the making. I think he wants to balance that with preserving his own power and autonomy for years to come at least. And therefore I'd be surprised if out of all of the fresh faces, which we're sure to see in the next party leadership, that there's any one of them that emerges with a title, a particular position of power that marks him, or it must be said much less likely her, as the heir-in-waiting to Xi Jinping.

Ali Moore:

And I guess that's the ultimate challenge, isn't it? Telling the nation that you have a plan, you have a roadmap versus keeping your options open. Where is that middle way?

Chris Buckley:

Yes, I do think this is a real challenge for Xi Jinping as powerful as he is. How much does he want to test his influence over the Chinese leadership and his standing, which is very high with many Chinese people, by continuing that uncertainty about what happens next? What succeeds him? How does he balance that with preserving his own autonomy and choices for years to come? Xi Jinping's very powerful, but I think that's a conundrum that's going to become increasingly tricky for him to balance.

Ali Moore:

Chris, you've been amazing. I know that much is murky, but you've certainly given us a terrific insight into the inner workings of China, as much as we can try to understand them. Thank you so much for talking to Ear to Asia. Thank you for your insights.

Chris Buckley:

I much enjoyed it. Thanks very much, Ali.

Ali Moore:

Our guest has been New York Times' chief China correspondent, Chris Buckley. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcasts app, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Podcasts. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And please help us by spreading the word on social media. This episode was recorded on the 25th of January 2022. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons Copyright 2022, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore. Thanks for your company.