



ASIA PACIFIC

Xi Jinping of China Arriving in U.S. at Moment of Vulnerability

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By **CHRIS BUCKLEY** and **JANE PERLEZ** SEPT. 21, 2015

BEIJING — President Xi Jinping of China looked regal as he stood in a limousine moving past Tiananmen Square this month, wearing a traditional suit of the kind favored by Mao and waving at parade troops assembled at attention. But the luster of Mr. Xi's imperial presidency has dulled lately.

China's economy has slowed more abruptly than policy makers have appeared ready for, alarming investors around the world. The government overestimated its ability to keep stock prices aloft, spending billions to bolster the Chinese markets. Mr. Xi's ambitious reform agenda, including an effort to revive a bloated state sector, has yielded few concrete results.

Often described as the most powerful leader of the Chinese Communist Party in generations, Mr. Xi is to arrive in the United States on Tuesday facing economic headwinds and growing doubts about his formula for governing — a sharp contrast with the image of unruffled control he projected when he hosted President Obama last year.

Yet he has shown no sign of retreating on an array of disputes that have bedeviled the Obama administration, including those about accelerated construction in disputed waters of the South China Sea and cyberattacks attributed to China that have targeted American businesses and government agencies. China has repeatedly denied having a role in those attacks.

The two countries have been negotiating what could become the first arms control accord for cyberspace, with a goal of announcing an agreement during Mr. Xi's visit. The deal would safeguard critical infrastructure during peacetime, but it is not expected to cover contentious issues such as the theft of intellectual property or data.

Analysts say Mr. Xi's recent setbacks will only reinforce his reluctance to offer concessions under pressure from the United States.

"Xi is obsessed with strategic rivalry with the United States," said Shi Yinong, a professor of international relations at Renmin University in Beijing. "The summit won't produce progress on strategic matters."

After almost three years in office, Mr. Xi has amassed daunting power. He has taken control of the party's most important policy committees. His scorching anticorruption campaign has subdued potential opponents. His prime minister and other colleagues have been relegated to cheerleading roles.

Mr. Xi's bustling, forceful approach was meant to yield bold and nimble governance after years of torpor and paralysis under his predecessors. But with so much authority concentrated in his hands, and such broad ambitions, the risks of bureaucratic confusion and overload are increasingly apparent, especially in the management of the Chinese economy, the second largest in the world.

"A lot of people are now sitting back and saying, 'Maybe this operation isn't as well wired as we thought it was,'" said Robert L. Suettinger, a senior adviser at the Stimson Center in Washington and a former Asia director on the National Security Council.

Mr. Xi "appears to be powerful, because he has placed himself in key positions," Mr. Suettinger added. "But the question is: Are decisions being made, and is the system beginning to move in the direction that he wants? That part, I think the jury is still out on."

Few see much likelihood of a serious leadership challenge to Mr. Xi, but his authority could suffer if these policy-making problems intensify and the economy continues to sputter.

“Xi, in his impressive consolidation of power in the short run, raises questions for the long run. Has he put himself in charge of too much?” said David M. Lampton, a professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies who has long studied China’s leaders.

“A principal danger” confronting Mr. Xi is that the economic slowdown will undermine public support for one-party rule, Professor Lampton added, and “President Xi seems to be compensating by emphasizing China’s resurgent role in the world.”

Even as Mr. Xi emphasizes his desire for good relations, China’s growing challenge to the United States will be in focus during his seven days in the United States. He is to begin in Seattle with a speech to business executives, as well as tours of Boeing and Microsoft, then go to Washington for his first visit there as president and finish in New York with his first address to the United Nations.

Though the Chinese economy has softened, Mr. Xi remains in a strong position for his meeting with Mr. Obama on Thursday.

Unless something extraordinary happens at the highest echelons of the Communist Party, Mr. Xi can expect seven more years in power, while Mr. Obama will leave office in 16 months, a gap that some Chinese scholars say has led Mr. Xi to view his counterpart as a lame duck.

Mr. Xi, 62, has no plausible challengers at the top of the party and remains popular with many Chinese citizens. His public stature was reinforced during the recent military parade near Tiananmen Square, and it will be again when he is greeted by a 21-gun salute and a state dinner at the White House, ceremonial high points for previous Chinese leaders.

Shen Dingli, a professor of international relations and expert on Sino-American relations at Fudan University in Shanghai, said American policy makers had trouble understanding Mr. Xi because “he’s an initiator, whereas traditionally Chinese leaders were reactive, waiting to respond.”

“He believes we are a major power and is more willing to confront the U.S.,” Professor Shen added.

Mr. Xi and Mr. Obama are expected to discuss their differences on a number of subjects, including cybersecurity, tensions in the South China Sea, the repatriation of Chinese officials accused of corruption and the Chinese government's harsh treatment of dissidents and lawyers.

Mr. Xi has left his mark on all of these issues since assuming leadership of the party in November 2012, taking tougher positions than his predecessors in most cases.

In a meeting with American business leaders in Beijing last week, Mr. Xi appeared self-assured, exuding confidence that, despite China's recent economic turbulence, his government holds the upper hand, an American with knowledge of the event said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss a closed meeting.

American corporate executives have complained that a new national security law in China and proposed laws on cybersecurity and counterterrorism will restrict their operations by subjecting them to unnecessary scrutiny from China's ever more powerful domestic security apparatus. But Mr. Xi offered a robust defense of the legislation in the meeting, according to the American with knowledge of the meeting.

"The evidence seems to be accumulating that Xi is a leader whose vision is mainly about centralizing power and asserting China's greatness," said Arthur Kroeber, a managing director of Gavekal Dragonomics, a research firm, and a longtime analyst of the Chinese economy. "When forced to choose between giving market forces more play in the name of efficiency and sustainable growth, or reasserting the primacy of the state regardless of the long-run economic cost," Mr. Xi seems more likely to choose the latter, he added.

Even as Mr. Xi prepared to meet American technology leaders in Seattle, his government recently asked American companies to pledge to uphold controversial policies that could require them to pass data and intellectual property on to Chinese authorities.

In foreign policy, too, Mr. Xi "seems less interested in cutting deals" than his predecessors, Professor Lampton said. "He has demonstrated a willingness to have more friction with the outside world than his predecessors."

The Obama administration is especially concerned about allegations of Chinese cyberattacks on American companies and government agencies, including the theft of trade secrets that are passed on to Chinese competitors and of millions of government employees' personal data.

“It is an area we have not seen progress or change in their behavior,” a senior administration official said.

Bilahari Kausikan, a former permanent secretary of Singapore's Foreign Ministry, said Chinese hacking of American targets was likely to continue because Mr. Xi had little incentive to stop it. “At present my guess is that, as China is relatively less wired than the U.S., it is also less vulnerable,” he said.

Mr. Xi is also not expected to accede to demands by the Obama administration that China stop building artificial islands and military facilities in the contested waters of the South China Sea, which some of the world's busiest shipping routes pass through. China, which claims jurisdiction over about 80 percent of the sea, has been building islands more than 800 miles from the Chinese mainland.

New satellite images released this month show that China has started building runways capable of military use on two new islands, which it created this year by piling sand on reefs in the disputed Spratly archipelago. The artificial islands are near the Philippines, which has appealed to the United States for help and is considering opening naval and air bases to American forces.

In a speech here last week intended to preview Mr. Xi's positions on major issues between China and the United States, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, sounded a defiant tone. “I wish to reiterate that the Nansha Islands are China's territory,” he said, using the Chinese name for the archipelago. “These are China's positions that will not change.”

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