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China's Xi Jinping is no superman

LINDA JAKOBSON THE AUSTRALIAN DECEMBER 31, 2014 12:00AM

PORTRAYALS of Xi Jinping the strongman abound. Xi is the strongest leader in every sense since Deng Xiaoping. He consolidated power faster than anyone expected after he took over as head of the Communist Party of China and the Central Military Commission two years ago. Even Barack Obama has publicly commented on Xi's hold on power.

However, this does not mean that Xi is on top of every decision. Xi shows the direction on any given issue with vaguely worded directives. For example, he emphasises that China must staunchly safeguard sovereignty and maritime rights in its "near seas" while upholding stability. But he does not stipulate how this balance should be maintained. Lower levels of government decide how this works (or doesn't).

And these lower levels are lobbied by many kinds of officials in numerous government entities as well as by officers of the People's Liberation Army and resource company executives. All of these actors, when standing up for China's maritime rights, have their own interests — possibly commercial gain, or the desire to secure government funding or attain political prestige.

As I have argued in a recent Lowy Institute report, it is erroneous to presume that China's assertive behaviour at sea in recent years is part of a central government-approved grand plan that mandates different actors co-operating in a co-ordinated manner or coercing its neighbours in a tailored way towards a mutual goal. It is a diverse set of maritime security actors pushing the limits of the permissible, not Xi pushing actors to the brink.

I do not argue that China's maritime actors can behave in any way they choose. Xi's guidelines box them in. It is entirely possible that Xi approves of most (or all) of the actions taken in China's name. My point is that Xi is not deciding on myriad actions, numerous maritime actors are.

Rights consciousness is a relatively new term in China. Protection of (sovereign) rights is used to justify just about anything. The present nationalistic atmosphere underlines the need for China to stand up to outsiders who encroach on its maritime rights.

Maritime consciousness is an even newer term in China. The importance of the maritime domain — everything from shipping to extraction of minerals and energy deposits to fishing — has rapidly risen during the past two decades. At the same time Chinese society has diversified and authority has been fractured because so many different actors want a say in decision-making processes. As the significance of the maritime domain to continued economic growth has increased, numerous interest groups realise they have a stake in — and an opinion about — China's "maritime interests".

Because China is a one-party authoritarian state many outsiders think it is governed by a rigid

top-down political structure. It is not. China's phenomenal economic rise would not have been possible without decentralisation, which has made provincial and municipal governments autonomous and powerful. While local governments cannot entirely ignore central directives on significant issues, they have numerous ways to circumvent, mould or slow down their implementation.

Tony Saich, a respected China watcher and professor at Harvard University, has written: "Most of the problems China confronts are related to questions of governance." Volumes have been written by Chinese and foreigners about governance difficulties in China related to stove-piping — individual government ministries or agencies that do not share information and/or collaborate.

Inter-agency co-operation — or the lack thereof — is intensely problematic. Controversial issues for which several bureaucracies have overlapping authority are prone to be further inflamed because of poor co-ordination due to fierce competition and a reluctance to communicate.

Just as portrayals of China tend to be too black-and-white, so too are assessments of Xi's grip on power. He is not a superman. He cannot ignore vital constituencies. CPC unity is paramount. Chinese elites want to see China stand tall and defend what they perceive as rightfully China's.

Ironically, Xi's signature project — the China dream — fuels nationalist sentiments, tying his hands in compromising with other countries.

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