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China Primer: China’s Political System

Introduction

The People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) is the only Communist Party-led state either among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council or among the members of the G-20 grouping of major economies. As Congress has intensified its focus on China in the context of U.S.-China strategic competition, Members have increasingly sought to legislate and conduct oversight on matters that require an understanding of the PRC political system. Select features of that system are introduced below.

The Party-State

The PRC is both a nation state and a Leninist “party-state.” The Communist Party of China (CPC), also known as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is China’s dominant political institution. It operates a powerful and expansive bureaucracy and tasks itself with “exercis[ing] overall leadership over all areas of endeavor in every part of the country.” The Party tasks the state, or government, with administration. Interlocking Party and state hierarchies extend down to the level of small towns. At every level, the

Party leader outranks the government leader (i.e., the premier, provincial governors, and mayors).

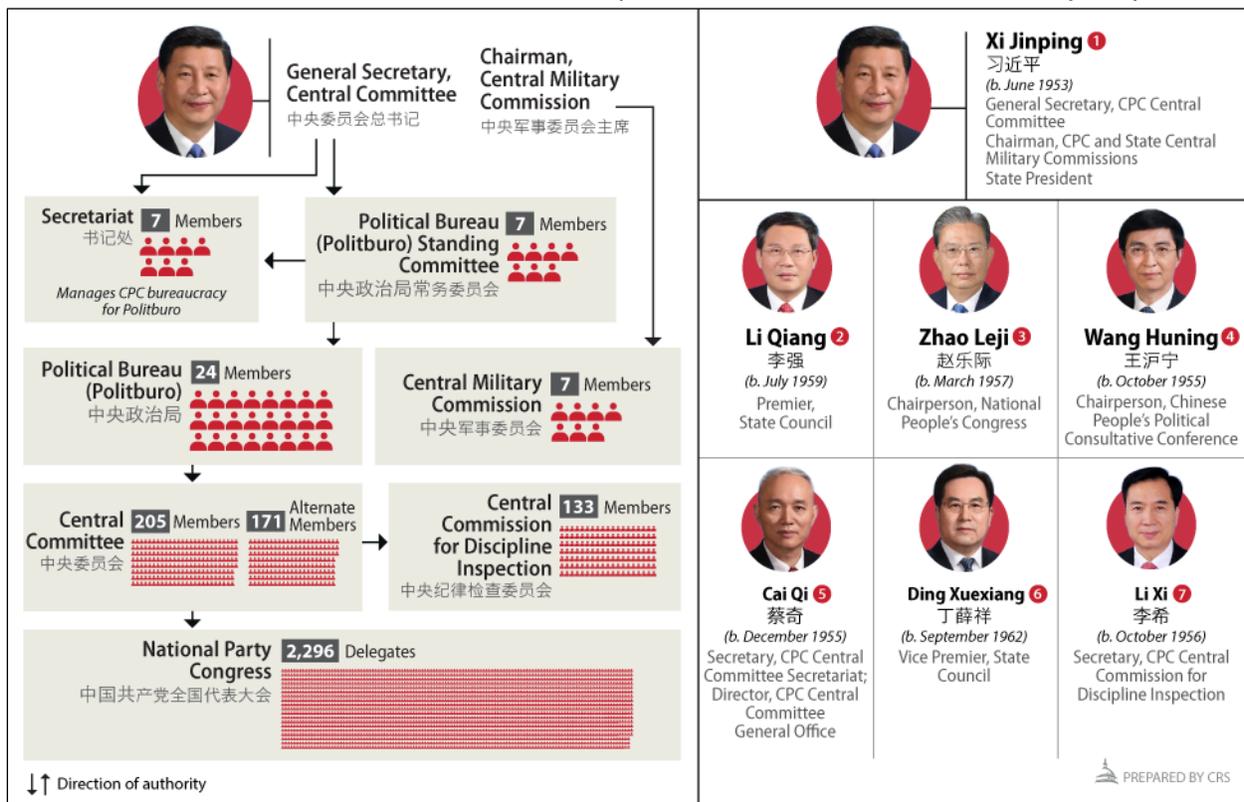
Xi Jinping, 70, leads the PRC party-state. He has served since 2012 as CPC General Secretary and Chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission, which oversees the Party’s armed wing, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). (The PLA formally and explicitly serves the Party, not the nation.) Xi also has served since 2013 as PRC President, a head of state position that officially has a minor role in the operations of the PRC government. Xi began his third five-year terms in his Party and state posts in 2022 and 2023.

The Communist Party of China

The CPC has led China for 74 years, since 1949. It now has 98 million members, nearly 7% of China’s population. All members completed a demanding application and vetting process to join. The Party’s highest institution is the Central Committee, led by the General Secretary and including an elite 24-person Political Bureau (Politburo) and an even more elite 7-man Politburo Standing Committee. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Hierarchies of the Communist Party of China (CPC, left) and Its Top Decisionmaking Body, the Party Central Committee’s Politburo Standing Committee (PSB, right)

PSB members are listed in rank order; several hold concurrent positions in other hierarchies; current as of January 29, 2024



Source: CRS graphic by Mari Y. Lee, based on data from the Communist Party of China’s news portal, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/>.

Several Politburo Standing Committee members hold concurrent posts atop other parts of the political system, ensuring Party control of all political life in China.

- The Party's no. 2 official, Li Qiang, serves concurrently as Premier of the **State Council**, the cabinet of China's Central People's Government, overseeing the government bureaucracy. The Party's no. 6 official, Ding Xuexiang, serves as his executive Vice Premier.
- The Party's no. 3 official, Zhao Leji, heads the **National People's Congress (NPC)**, China's unicameral legislature and, by protocol, China's counterpart to the U.S. Congress. China's people do not directly elect the NPC's nearly 3,000 delegates. Rather, delegates to sub-national bodies—provincial-level people's congresses and election councils for the PLA, Hong Kong, Macao, and, purportedly, "Taiwan compatriots"—elect NPC delegates, based on lists drawn up by the Party.
- The Party's no. 4 official, Wang Huning, heads the **Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)**, a political advisory body that seeks to win support for the CPC from groups across society, including minor political parties loyal to the CPC; organizations such as the Communist Youth League; and ethnic minority, religious, and professional communities. The CPC refers to this exercise as building a "patriotic united front." Wang also oversees policy toward Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.

The Party's no. 5 official, Cai Qi, and the Party **Secretariat** manage the CPC Central Committee's bureaucracy. Under Xi, that bureaucracy has expanded to absorb some functions previously managed by the state, and has embraced a more public role. It includes five functional departments:

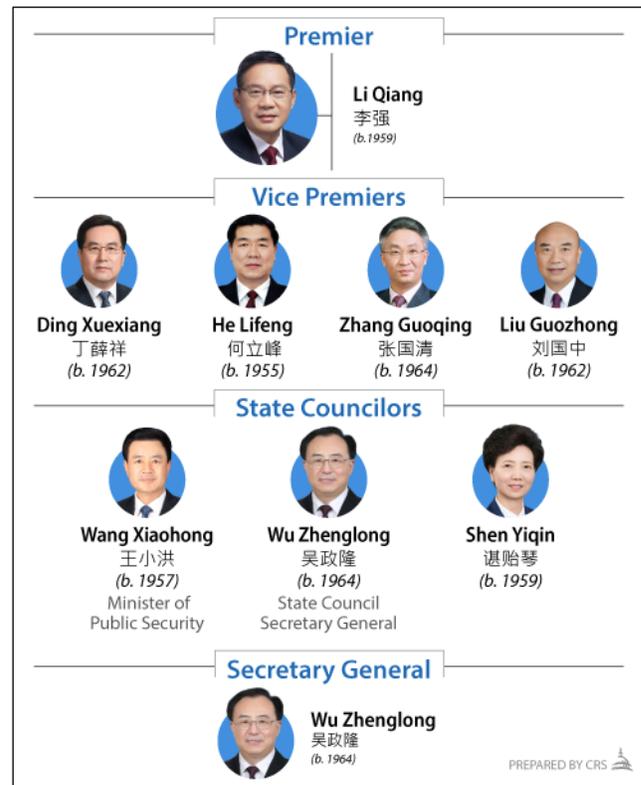
- **The Organization Department** is the Party's personnel agency, responsible for recruiting and training Party, civil service, and other personnel, and assigning them to positions across the party-state.
- **The Publicity Department (or Propaganda Department)** is responsible for the Party's messaging and for control of the media, cultural institutions, and ideology.
- **The Commission for Political and Legal Affairs** is responsible for "safeguarding social stability," oversees the work of the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, and the Ministries of Public Security, State Security, and Justice. The heads of those institutions serve as commission members.
- **The United Front Work Department (UFWD)**, like the CPPCC, works to manage relations with and coopt diverse social groups. Its responsibilities include work related to Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and diaspora communities.
- **The International Department** (also known as the International Liaison Department, or ILD) is responsible for party-to-party relations. It is the lead agency for PRC relations with fellow communist states Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam.

The Central Committee bureaucracy also includes offices for high-profile commissions, some of which Xi upgraded from "leading small groups" that had previously operated in

the shadows. Such offices include the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs. Its director, Wang Yi, is a Politburo member and serves as China's top diplomat.

The State (Government)

Figure 2. China's State Council Leadership



Source: CRS graphic by Mari Y. Lee based on data from <http://www.gov.cn>. Current as of January 29, 2024.

The State Council (**Figure 2**) is the state's top institution, led by the Premier, who is also the Party's no. 2 official. Below him are four vice premiers, all members of the CPC Politburo. Below them are state councilors; they do not sit on the Politburo, but are members of other senior Party bodies and the State Council's own Party committee. In October 2023, Xi Jinping, in his capacity as state president, removed two state councilors from office: former Foreign Minister Qin Gang and former Defense Minister Li Shangfu. Both appear to have fallen afoul of investigations overseen by the Party's no. 7 official, Li Xi, who heads the Party's **Central Commission for Discipline Inspection**. Wang Yi now serves concurrently as the Party's top diplomat and as foreign minister, a less senior state position. Dong Jun is defense minister. Unusually, Dong, for now, is neither a state councilor nor a member of the Party or State Central Military Commission. The agencies that comprise the State Council are 21 government ministries, three ministerial-level commissions, the central bank, and the National Audit Office. Most of these agency leaders, but not all, are full members of the CPC Central Committee and head their own agencies' Party committees.

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