

September 29, 2023

China Primer: China's Political System

Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC or China) is the only Communist Party-led state 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), has led China for 74 years, since 1949, longer than any other communist party in history. The Party now has 98 million members, nearly 7% of China's population, all of whom completed a demanding application and vetting process to join. The political system also includes a state, or government, tasked 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.

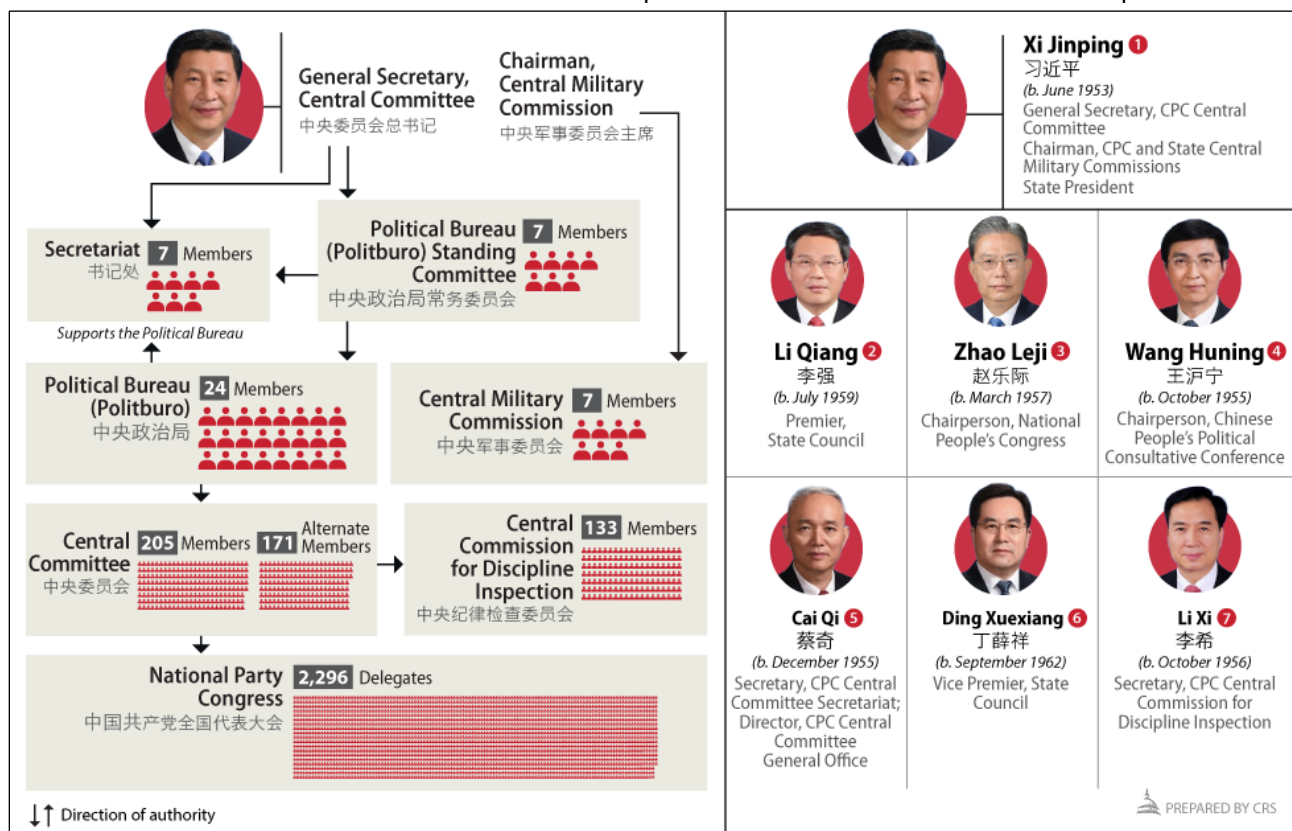
Xi Jinping, 70, leads the PRC party-state. He has served since 2012 as CPC General Secretary and Chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission, which oversees the Party's armed wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). (The PLA formally and explicitly serves the Party, not the nation.) Xi also 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 Party's top national-level 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. Several Politburo Standing Committee members hold concurrent posts atop other parts of the political system, ensuring Party control of all political life in China. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Hierarchies of the Communist Party of China and Its Top Decisionmaking Body, the Party Politburo Standing Committee (PSB)

PSB members are listed in rank order; several hold concurrent positions in other hierarchies; current as of Sept. 29, 2023



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

- 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 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, such as provincial-level congresses and election councils for the PLA, Hong Kong, Macao, and purportedly for "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 and Taiwan.

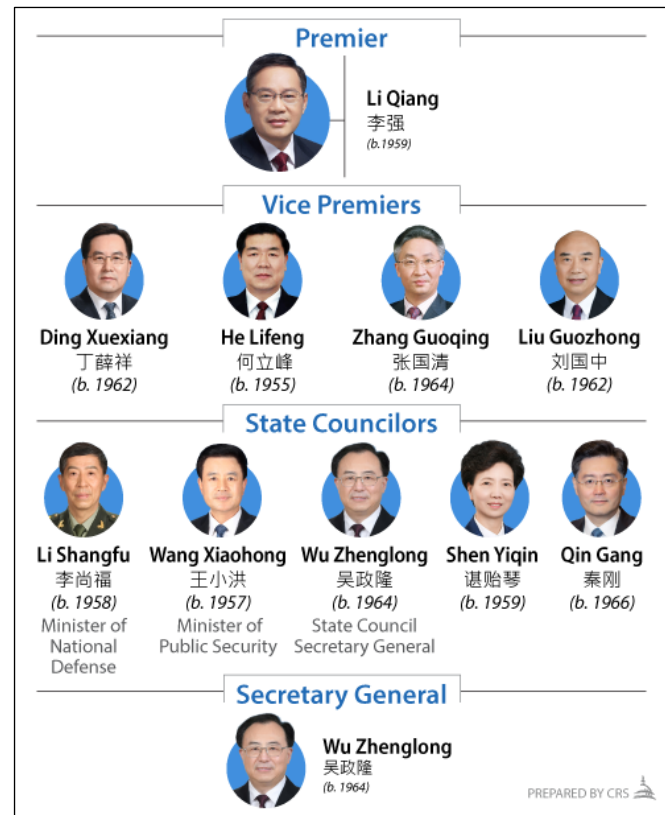
The CPC Central Committee operates a powerful bureaucracy, overseen by the Party's no. 5 official, Cai Qi, and the Party Secretariat. Under Xi, the Party bureaucracy has expanded to absorb functions previously managed by the state, and has embraced a more public role. It includes five functional departments:

- **The Organization Department**, 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)**, responsible for the Party's messaging and for control of the media, cultural institutions, and ideology.
- **The Commission for Political and Legal Affairs**, 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 each institution serve as commission members.
- **The United Front Work Department (UFWD)**, which, like the CPPCC, works to coopt and manage relations with 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), 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 Party 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 Commission for Foreign Affairs. Its director, Wang Yi, is a member of the 24-person Politburo and serves as China's top diplomat.

The State Council

Figure 2. China's State Council Hierarchy
Current as of September 29, 2023



Source: CRS graphic by Mari Lee based on data from <http://www.gov.cn>.

PRC officials often meet with high-level visitors from non-communist countries as state officials (i.e., state councilors, ministers, governors, and mayors). Because of the interlocking nature of the hierarchies, senior state interlocutors are almost always senior Party officials, too, though they may not disclose their Party titles to visitors. As noted, the Premier of the State Council, China's government cabinet, serves concurrently on the Party's 7-man Politburo Standing Committee. The four Vice Premiers are all members of the Party's 24-person Politburo. The five State Councilors do not hold Politburo seats, but are members of other senior Party bodies and sit on the State Council's own Party committee. (Two of China's current state councilors—Qin Gang and Li Shangfu—have not made public appearances, in weeks, raising questions about whether they may have fallen afoul of Party discipline investigations, another prominent feature of political life in China under Xi.) The members of the State Council are the ministers of China's 21 government ministries, the chairs of three ministerial-level commissions, the governor of the central bank, and the head of the National Audit office. All but six are full members of the Central Committee, and all but two also lead their own agencies' Party committees.

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