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China Primer: China’s Political System

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 and among the G-20 major economies. This report provides a brief introduction to its political system.

The Party-State

The PRC is 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, per the CPC Constitution, “exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavor in every part of the country.” The Party tasks the government with administration. Interlocking Party and government hierarchies extend down to the level of small towns, with the Party leader at every level outranking his (or occasionally her) government counterpart. Provincial Party secretaries outrank governors, and municipal Party secretaries outrank mayors.

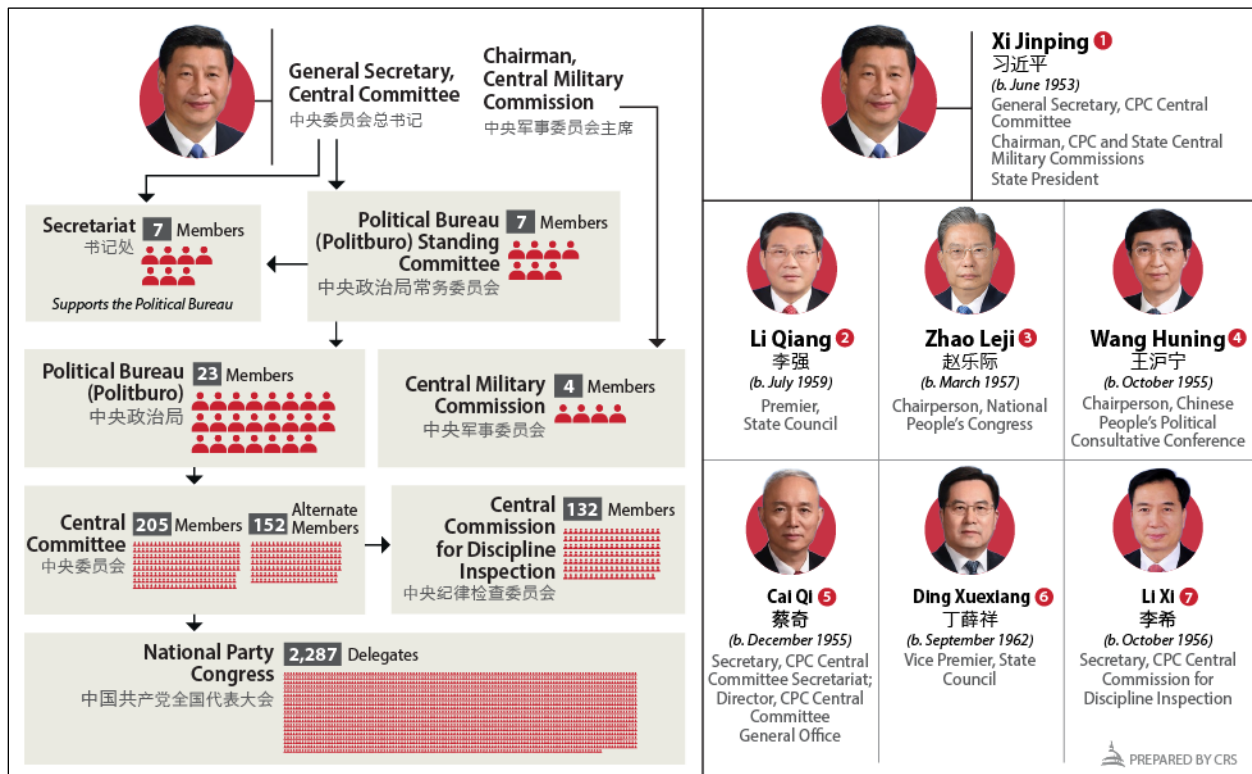
Xi Jinping, 72, leads the PRC party-state. He has served since 2012 as CPC General Secretary and Chairman of the

CPC Central Military Commission (CMC), the body that oversees the Party’s armed wing. Since 2013, Xi also has served as PRC President, a head-of-state position with limited responsibilities. Xi broke norms by claiming third five-year terms in his Party and state posts starting in 2022 and 2023. He has not indicated whether he will seek fourth five-year terms in his Party posts at the CPC’s 21st National Congress, to be held in the second half of 2027.

The Communist Party of China

The CPC, officially founded in 1921, established the PRC on October 1, 1949. Today, the CPC’s 100.3 million members constitute 7% of China’s population. All members applied and underwent vetting to join. The Party’s apex institution is the 205-member Central Committee, with General Secretary Xi as its “core.” An all-male, 23-person subset of the Central Committee serves on its elite Political Bureau (Politburo). A 7-person subset of the Politburo serves on the Politburo Standing Committee, China’s top decisionmaking body. (Figure 1.) The Central Committee meets for a “plenum” at least once annually.

Figure 1. 20th CPC Hierarchy (left) and Central Committee Politburo Standing Committee (right)



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

Note: Data current as of 4/27/2026. Politburo Standing Committee members are listed in rank order. Since the 20th CPC National Congress in October 2022, the Central Committee has lost 14 members (12 expelled, one resigned, one died) and promoted 14 alternate members to fill its vacancies. The Politburo has lost one member (expelled), with two members under investigation. The 20th Central Military Commission has lost three members (expelled); two of the remaining four are under investigation.

Politburo Standing Committee members hold concurrent posts atop all major parts of the political system, ensuring Party control of political life in China. In his CMC Chairman role, Xi Jinping oversees active duty and reserve forces of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), plus the People's Armed Police and the People's Militia. They all formally and explicitly serve the Party, not the country. Since 2023, Xi has carried out a far-reaching purge of senior military leaders, leaving a single uniformed officer actively serving under him on the CMC.

Currently, the Party's no. 2 official, Li Qiang, serves concurrently as Premier of the **State Council**, the cabinet of the Central People's Government, overseeing the government bureaucracy. The Party's no. 6 official, Ding Xuexiang, serves as the most senior Vice Premier.

The Party's no. 3 official, Zhao Leji, heads the **National People's Congress (NPC)**, China's unicameral legislature. The NPC meets in full session each March. It enacts and amends laws, approves the government budget and national development plans, and appoints top government leaders. Delegates to 31 provincial-level people's congresses plus election councils for Hong Kong, Macao, the PLA and, purportedly, "Taiwan compatriots" elect the NPC's nearly 3,000 delegates, all based on CPC candidate lists. One-third of NPC delegates are senior CPC and government officials.

The Party's no. 4 official, Wang Huning, heads the **Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)**, a political advisory body that meets in full session each March alongside the NPC. Their annual meetings are known as the "Two Sessions." The CPPCC's role is to unite all society behind the CPC, an exercise the Party calls building a "patriotic united front." The CPPCC's nearly 3,000 members represent 34 groups: the CPC; 8 CPC-approved minor political parties; non-party members; 8 "social organizations," such as the Communist Youth League; 13 "social circles," such as religious bodies; and 3 categories of "specially-invited personages." Wang also manages Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan policy.

The CPC's no. 5 official, Cai Qi, heads both the CPC Central Committee's **General Office** and its **Secretariat**. The latter manages the CPC Central Committee bureaucracy, which includes six functional departments.

- **The Organization Department** is the Party's personnel agency, responsible for recruiting and training 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 guiding the media and ideological work.
- **The United Front Work Department** works to win over non-CPC groups at home and abroad, including ethnic and religious communities; private business; and populations in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and globally, with a focus on the ethnic-Chinese diaspora.
- **The International Department** handles external party-to-party relations and takes the lead on diplomacy with fellow Communist countries, including North Korea.
- **The Commission for Political and Legal Affairs** oversees the work of the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, and the Ministries of Public Security (MPS), State Security (MSS), and

Justice. A former MSS Minister currently leads the commission; the sitting MPS minister is his deputy.

- **The Society Work Department** exerts Party control over management of public complaints, as well as community governance, social work, volunteer work, industry associations, and chambers of commerce.

The Party's no. 7 official, Li Xi, heads the Party's **Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI)**, which investigates CPC members for alleged violations of "discipline," including corruption. His top deputy heads the **National Commission of Supervision**, an ostensibly government agency that investigates public sector employees for misconduct and corruption. Another deputy oversees the **CMC Discipline Inspection Commission**, and currently serves also as CMC Vice Chairman.

Central People's Government/The State

The Premier, a CPC Politburo Standing Committee member, leads the **State Council (Figure 2)**, also known as the Central People's Government. Four vice premiers, including a Politburo Standing Committee member, manage primarily economic portfolios. Below them, state councilors manage other portfolios; state councilor positions for foreign affairs and military affairs have been vacant since Xi removed their incumbents in 2023. The State Council comprises 21 ministries and 3 ministerial-level commissions, the central bank, and a national audit office.

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 April 27, 2026.

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