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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 among either the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council or 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

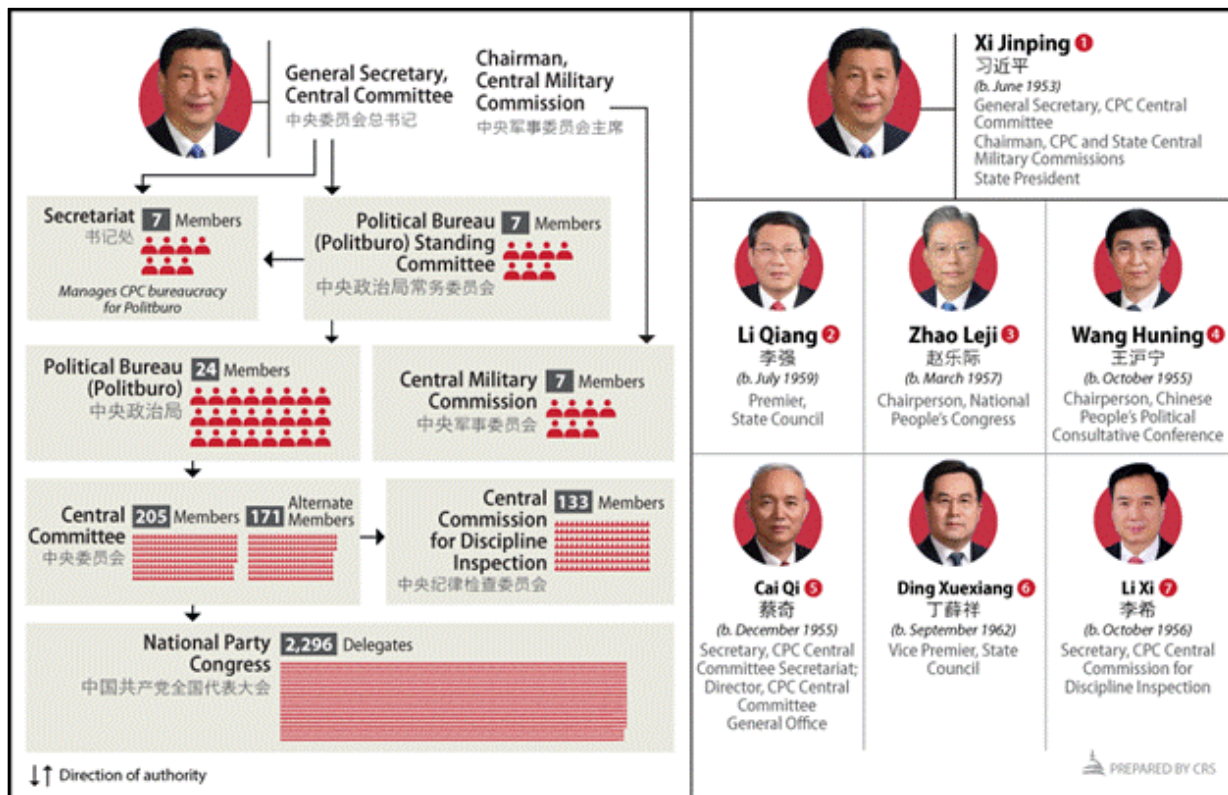
The PRC is a Leninist “party-state.” The Communist Party of China (CPC), also known as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is China’s dominant political institution. It operates a powerful and expansive bureaucracy and tasks itself with “exercis[ing] overall leadership over all areas of endeavor in every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

Xi Jinping, 71, 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 latter comprises active duty and reserve forces of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), plus the People’s Armed Police (PAP) and the People’s Militia. They all formally and explicitly serve the Party, not the country.) 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 established the PRC on October 1, 1949. Today, the CPC’s 99 million-plus members constitute nearly 7% of China’s population. All members completed an application and vetting process to join. The Party’s apex institution is the Central Committee, led by the General Secretary and including an all-male and all Han-ethnicity 24-person Political Bureau (Politburo) and a more elite, all-male and all-Han 7-person Politburo Standing Committee. The latter is China’s top decisionmaking body. (Figure 1.)

Figure 1. The Communist Party of China (CPC) (left) and Its Politburo Standing Committee (right)



Note: CPC Politburo Standing Committee members are listed in rank order; current as of January 1, 2025.

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

The CPC requires the Central Committee to meet at least once annually, with meetings known as “plenary sessions” or “plenums.” 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 current 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 executive Vice Premier.

The Party’s current no. 3 official, Zhao Leji, heads the **National People’s Congress (NPC)**, China’s unicameral legislature. The NPC’s nearly 3,000 delegates represent 33 provincial-level jurisdictions, plus, purportedly, “Taiwan compatriots” and the PLA. One-third of delegates are sitting Party and government officials. The NPC enacts and amends laws and approves the state budget and national plans for economic and social development.

The Party’s current no. 4 official, Wang Huning, heads the **Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference**, a political advisory body. Its nearly 3,000 members represent 34 groups: the CPC; 8 CPC-approved minor political parties; non-party members; 8 “social organizations,” including the All-China Women’s Federation; 13 “social circles,” including scientists and religious figures; and 3 categories of “specially-invited personages.” Its role is to unite all society behind the CPC, an exercise the CPC calls building a “patriotic united front.” Wang also manages Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan policy.

The CPC’s no. 5 official, Cai Qi, heads the Party **Secretariat**. It 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** seeks to win support for the CPC from non-CPC groups at home and abroad, including intellectual, ethnic, and religious communities; private business; and populations in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and globally, with a focus on ethnic-Chinese diaspora communities.
- **The Commission for Political and Legal Affairs** is responsible for public security and “social stability.” It 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 all those institutions serve as commission members.
- **The International Department** handles party-to-party relations. It takes the lead on diplomacy with Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam.
- **The Social Work Department** seeks to strengthen Party control over community governance, social work, volunteer work, industry federations, chambers of commerce, and management of public complaints.

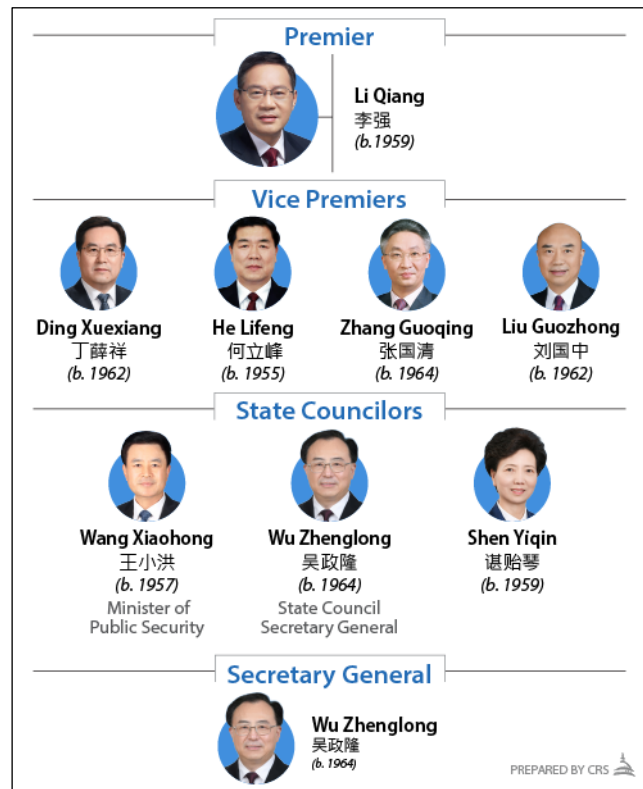
The Central Committee bureaucracy also includes the offices of high-profile commissions, some of which Xi upgraded from “leading small groups” that had previously operated less publicly. They include a National Security Commission and a Central Foreign Affairs Commission.

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 established in 2018 to investigate public sector employees for misconduct and corruption. The two commissions share offices, staff, and a website.

Central People’s Government/The State

The premier leads the State Council (**Figure 2**), the government’s top institution. Immediately below him are four vice premiers, all members of the CPC Politburo. Below them are state councilors, who do not hold Politburo rank. State councilor positions for foreign affairs and military affairs have been vacant since October 2023, when Xi Jinping abruptly removed their incumbents. Agencies comprising the State Council are 21 government ministries, 3 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.

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 1, 2025.

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