

***Hearing on “CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress”***

*Thursday, January 27, Dirksen Senate Office Building 419*

“Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review  
Commission”

**Panel III: Foreign Policy and National Security Decision-  
Making**

**Statement for the Record**

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1. Please describe the foreign policy decision-making apparatus in China. Which institutions and policy bodies are most important in formulating, debating, and communicating foreign policy?

In the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leads the state. Thus, the most powerful decision-making institutions and bodies regarding all issues, including foreign policy matters, are not located in the state but in the Party. At the top of the CCP hierarchy, the most important body formulating and debating foreign policy is the Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission (*Zhongyang Waishi Gongzuo Weiyuanhui*, hereafter FAC), chaired by Xi Jinping. Under Xi, the Commission’s most powerful official is Yang Jiechi, who heads its Office (*Bangongshi*), its most powerful decision-making locus. Former State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Yang was elevated at the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress in 2017 to the position of Politburo (PB) member, enhancing his status and political influence.

The size of the FAC Office is unknown. Since September 2018, its Deputy Director is Liu Jianchao, former Foreign Ministry Spokesperson and former ambassador to the Philippines and Indonesia. He succeeded to Le Yucheng, now Deputy Foreign Minister and a rising star in the Foreign Ministry.

These appointments underscore the close relationship between the FAC and the Foreign Ministry which has remained the main institution communicating on foreign policy. The full membership of the FAC is unknown. However, the name of two of its key members has been made public: these are Prime Minister Li Keqiang, who is the FAC Vice-President, and Vice-President of the Republic Wang Qishan. Two other top officials, both Politburo Standing Committee members (PBSC), the CCP seven-member top leadership body, took part in its first meeting in May 2018: Wang Huning, head of the CCP Central Secretariat, and Han Zheng, Vice-Premier in charge of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Leading Small Group on Hong Kong and Macau.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2018/0515/c64094-29992327.html> (consulted on January 20, 2022).

The FAC probably includes another ten ex-officio members, leading and representing their own bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup> Among them, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, CCP Propaganda Department Director Huang Kunming, CCP International Liaison Department Director Song Tao, Commerce Minister Wang Wentao, Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and State Security Minister Chen Wenqing can be mentioned. It is also almost certain that the heads of the Taiwan Affairs Office, Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, State Council Information Office and Overseas Chinese Office also sit in the FAC.

It is difficult to evaluate the respective influence of these officials in the FAC. While Li Keqiang, in spite of his status, does not appear to be influential, we can think that Wang Qishan, although semi-retired, has more say on foreign policy matters. It should be also noted that while not a formal member of the PBSC or the PB, Wang attends its meetings and is ranked in the eighth position in any official Party-state leader listing, in other words above PB members.

Yet, while debating about foreign policy, PBSC meetings probably just endorse decisions in this area prepared by the Foreign Ministry and finalized by the FAC Office. This is even more the case of the PB (25 members) which is from time to time invited to hear foreign policy experts presenting major foreign policy issues. PB meetings' published agenda rarely include foreign policy items.

The FAC itself does not apparently meet frequently. Since the FAC's first plenary meeting in May 2018, there has not been any public announcement of subsequent meetings. Even if we cannot exclude that it meets secretly, the FAC seems to delegate to its Office many of its responsibilities. Besides, from a practical viewpoint, assembling a dozen top CCP and state officials is rather uneasy, all the more since the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress, Yang Jiechi and, behind him, Wang Yi—even if Wang seems often more active, aggressive and agitated than Yang—have been China's main foreign policy actors. Nonetheless, another top official, very close to Xi—he worked with him in Shanghai in 2006-2007—has become more influential on foreign policy matters: this is Ding Xuexiang, Central Committee General Office Director. While in charge of the CCP apparatus and mainly busy with domestic affairs and the circulation of official documents in the Party-state structure, Ding attends all the meetings or, since the beginning of the pandemic, the videoconferences between the Chinese President and foreign head of state or prime ministers. Prior to 2017, Wang Huning played that role. As a result, it can be assumed that Ding has also some say on foreign policy.

2. What are the major changes that Xi Jinping has made to the foreign policy decision-making process, as compared to Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin?

The major change related to foreign policy as such has to do with the elevation in March 2018 of the CCP Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (*Zhonggong Zhongyang Waishi Lingdao Xiaozu*, LSG hereafter) to the status of Committee (*Weiyuanhui*). This has been part of a reform aimed at strengthening the role of the CCP central leading bodies

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<sup>2</sup> For a moderately reliable source, <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E5%A4%AE%E5%A4%96%E4%BA%8B%E5%B7%A5%E4%BD%9C%E5%A7%94%E5%91%98%E4%BC%9A> (consulted on January 24, 2022).

as opposed to the state structure, formally headed by the State Council and Prime Minister Li Keqiang.<sup>3</sup> Then, another three LSGs, all chaired by Xi, were turned into commissions: the long-existing Finance and Economy LSG (hereafter FEC), the Comprehensively Deepening Reforms LSG (hereafter CDRC) and the Cybersecurity and Informatization LSG (hereafter CIC). The decision to create the two latter LSGs was made at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in November 2013. Obviously, there has also been a clear political dimension in this effort to centralize even more power in the hands of the Party center, and Xi himself.

This reform followed a more profound and consequential decision made at the same November 2013 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenum, the establishment of a National Security Commission (*Guojia Anquan Weiyuanhui*), also chaired by Xi. While the NSC mainly deals with domestic security, it is also responsible of transnational security issues, as terrorism or crisis management, and reports suggest that it spends part of its time managing foreign policy matters. The NSC's two Vice-Chairmen are Li Keqiang and Li Zhanshu, National People's Congress Chairman and No. 3 of the CCP hierarchy. But its most important member is probably Ding Xuexiang who heads its Office, in other words its permanent structure. The Office includes two deputy heads: Liu Haixing, since March 2018, and Chen Wenqing, since May 2018. Liu is a former assistant foreign minister (*buzhang zhuli*), a position just under vice-minister rank. And as we have seen, Chen is Minister of State Security, the bureaucracy in charge of espionage and counterespionage.

The real issue is the lack of available information on the NSC, its exact role, the frequency of its meetings and, as a result, the division of labor that has taken shape between the NSC and the FAC. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the NSC has formally and publicly met only once, in April 2018.<sup>4</sup> Since then, no other NSC meeting has been reported; and its full membership has not been made public either.<sup>5</sup>

While all major issues including a national security dimension are probably formulated and debated by the NSC, and implemented by agencies that are represented in the NSC (PLA, Ministry of Public Security, People's Armed Police, etc.), coordination with the FAC, and the Foreign Ministry, is crucial. Although, as we have seen, Xi chairs both bodies, a proper division of labor and coordination between them depends very much upon the relationship between Yang Jiechi and Ding Xuexiang. It can be added that, under Xi, China has adopted a much more holistic approach to national security, giving naturally more say to the NSC than to the FAC, on a large number of international issues.

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<sup>3</sup> On the changes in foreign policy decision-making since Xi Jinping came to power, cf. my articles: "China's foreign and security policy institutions and decision-making under Xi Jinping", *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2021, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 319–336, DOI: 10.1177/1369148120974881; "China's Institutional Changes in the Foreign and Security Policy Realm Under Xi Jinping: Power Concentration vs. Fragmentation Without Institutionalization", *East Asia*, Vol 34 (2017), pp. 113-131. DOI: 10.1007/s12140-017-9271-4. Published on line on 24 May 2017, <http://rdcu.be/tdZu>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-04/17/content\\_5283445.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-04/17/content_5283445.htm) (accessed on January 21, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> The most comprehensive NSC membership lineup was made public on the occasion of the February 2017 NSC meeting, *Sohu*, February 17, 2017, <http://news.sohu.com/20170217/n481030722.shtml> (accessed on January 24, 2022). This was the source of the moderately reliable membership list published by Wikipedia in Chinese, <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E5%A4%AE%E5%9B%BD%E5%AE%B6%E5%AE%89%E5%85%A8%E5%A7%94%E5%91%98%E4%BC%9A> (accessed on January 24, 2022).

The March 2018 reform has however strengthened the FAC in one respect: it absorbed the Maritime Rights and Interest Protection LSG (*Zhongyang Weihu Haiyang Quanyi Gongzuo Lingdao Xiaozu*), dismantled at the same time. This LSG had been chaired by Xi since its creation in mid-2012. This change has facilitated coordination between the diplomats and the security agencies involved in the securization of the maritime domain claimed by China. Yet, on this issue and more broadly on matters related to military security, the CCP Central Military Commission (*Zhongyang Junshi Weiyuanhui*, thereafter CMC), also chaired by Xi, has kept a key competence. For example, in the South China Sea or East China Sea, the CMC holds the power to lead and coordinate the actions of the PLA Navy, the Coast Guard and the Maritime Militia, the latter being often on the frontline to harass incoming foreign ships. As a result, the CMC continues to exert indirect influence on the country's foreign policy. And one can even speculate that the reduction of the CMC from 11 to 7 members decided in 2015, in concentrating to a larger degree power in the hands of the two CMC vice-chairmen (general Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia) and the Chief of the General Staff (generals Li Zuocheng), has enhanced this influence. The presence of PLA generals (and CMC members) in the FAC and the NSC is likely to facilitate coordination. Nonetheless, the existence of these three top power *loci* perpetuates the risks of foreign policy fragmentation.

The three other LSGs turned into commissions (Finance and Economics, Comprehensively Deepening Reform and Cybersecurity and Informatization) have competences that may overlap with foreign affairs. Here again, we know too little about their respective division of labor with the FAC. Actually, there are less risks of overlap with the two latter commissions than with the former. The agenda of the 23 meetings that the CDRC has held between the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and December 2021 shows a clear inclination to concentrate, with a few exceptions, on domestic economic, financial, social, educational and cultural matters.<sup>6</sup> And although the CIC is in charge of the Great Firewall and, more broadly, the consolidation of China's cyber-sovereignty, issues of interest to the FAC, its main focus is the control of domestic Internet. Regarding the FEC, while it mainly deals with domestic issues, more coordination with the FAC is probably required as far as international economic relations and trade negotiations are concerned. Although both commissions are chaired by Xi, at the working level, a smooth coordination between the FEC and the FAC today depends upon the relationship between Liu He, the FEC Office Director, and Yang Jiechi.

Finally, since 2012, two CCP central LSGs have not changed status: the one in charge of Taiwan and the one responsible for Hong Kong and Macau affairs. The former remains chaired by the Party General Secretary, in other words Xi, while the latter was transferred in 2017 from the NPC chair, or CCP PBSC No. 3 (then Zhang Dejiang), to the first Vice-Premier, Han Zheng, or CCP PBSC No. 7. Nonetheless, this downgrading in terms of status just reflects the two PRC Special Administrative Regions' decreasing importance in the eyes of the CCP leadership.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/中央全面深化改革委员会> (accessed on January 22, 2022).

3. To what extent has Xi Jinping centralized the foreign policy process and consolidated his personal control over foreign policy decisions?

It must first be indicated that foreign policy process has always been concentrated in the hands of the CCP No. 1, and since Deng Xiaoping's retirement in 1994, its General Secretary.<sup>7</sup> Since then, the CCP General Secretary has chaired not only the CMC (except between 2002 and 2004 when Jiang Zemin remained CMC chair) but also the two major LSGs dealing with external affairs, the Foreign Affairs LSG, today the FAC, and the Taiwan Affairs LSG.

The real question is whether the structural changes presented above has consolidated Xi's control over foreign policy decisions. On the one hand, today more commissions and LSGs and as a result top officials may have a say on foreign policy matters. On the other hand, since Xi chairs all these leading bodies, he can better lead and coordinate their action. Moreover, Xi's enhanced status in the Party—he is “commander-in-chief of the PLA joint battle command center”, his “thought” has been increasingly promoted—and his propension to neglect the collective leadership principle reintroduced by Deng Xiaoping at the beginning of the reform era are conducive to consolidating his control over foreign policy.

Xi's major problem may not be intra-Party opposition to these changes but the unintended consequences of this greater power centralization. A key consequence of this new institutional setting is the need for Xi to chair more CCP commissions and LSGs than his predecessors, even if some of these leading bodies apparently do not meet regularly. In any case, this power concentration has compelled him to delegate formulation and implementation to more trusted aides, in particular Yang Jiechi and Ding Xuexiang, and to a lesser extent, Wang Qishan and Wang Yi.

4. How would you characterize the division of labor between Party organs and state ministries in shaping foreign policy decision-making?

Party organs, especially the FAC, decide upon the general principles, orientations and priorities of China's foreign policy. They may also endorse foreign policy decisions prepared by the state ministries. But they do not have the workforce to manage every day's foreign relations and diplomatic interactions. Although the size of the personnel working in the FAC or the NSC offices is unknown (200 to 300 in the case of the FEC Office according to some estimates), it is rather small (perhaps 100 to 200). Consequently, to make decisions, the FAC and the NSC need to rely on state ministries' staff, expertise and daily management, particularly the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Commerce, Public Security and State Security; and for the Taiwan LSG and the Hong Kong and Macau LSG, the State Council Offices in charge of these issues. Actually, in the case of Taiwan affairs, both the CCP Central Committee and the State Council offices constitute only one administration with two slightly different names, underscoring the blurring line between the Party and state. We can go further: while the Party clearly leads the state, it has also penetrated the state since all state top officials

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<sup>7</sup> On this issue, please refer to my previous article: “China's Foreign- and Security-policy Decision-making Processes under Hu Jintao”, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 3, March 2009, pp. 63-97.

are Party leading cadres and each ministry is led by an in-house Party Group (*danzu*) and Party Committee (*dangwei*).

5. What role do subnational interests and initiatives, such as at the provincial or municipal level, play in China's foreign policy? How has this role changed under Xi?

Since the beginning of the reform era, Chinese localities have been allowed to develop their own foreign relations, particularly in the economic, cultural and educational realms. This has particularly been the case of provincial-level entities and prefecture-level municipalities. Foreign Ministry' and Commerce Ministry's local branches help and supervise them in their task. For example, many municipalities have established sister-city relations with foreign cities, stimulating direct commercial, cultural or educational exchanges with them.

Since Xi came to power, Chinese localities' foreign policy role has witnessed two contradictory changes. On the one hand, Xi has reduced their autonomy, particularly in the area of foreign security. Every provincial and even sub-provincial government has been required to set up a local security commission. Sensitive regions' external relations, for example Xinjiang, Tibet and even Inner Mongolia, have been more strictly managed by the center. On the other hand, Xi has given more leeway to localities in their participation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this vast project launched in 2013 and aimed at enhancing connectivity between China and the rest of the world. All provinces have tried to take advantage of the BRI to get additional funding from Beijing and develop new economic partnerships with foreign countries. While border provinces as Guangxi and Yunnan have been in a privileged position to benefit from the BRI, many other localities have participated in it, promoting their shipping links, air links or rail links to the outside world.

6. What areas of friction exist within China's foreign policy apparatus? Has the proliferation of foreign policy-related institutions under Xi Jinping lessened or increased this friction?

I have already partly addressed this issue above. Broadly speaking, there are two types of frictions in China's foreign policy apparatus: disagreements about policies and inter-agencies' bureaucratic tensions.

The former type of frictions goes beyond the scope of this statement. As an illustration of these frictions, I will mention Xi's "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy". Some officials, as Wang Yi, have become zealous implementers of this new diplomatic style. Others, as Cui Yuankai, former Ambassador to the United States, recently (December 2021) have obliquely criticized the negative impact of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy on China's image and, as a result, interests.

The later type of frictions has been a constant feature of China's "fragmented authoritarianism", a concept coined by Kenneth Lieberthal in the early 1990s. Arguably, under Xi, power centralization and a better inter-agency coordination have contributed to decreasing such frictions. China's fragmented authoritarianism is more integrated than before, as Danish sinologist Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard has argued in 2017.

Nevertheless, these frictions have not totally disappear. I will give below a few examples:

a) *Frictions between the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Commerce, or between the diplomats and the merchants*: these frictions can be caused by a lack of common objectives or coordination about ongoing trade negotiations with other countries; they can also result from disagreements between both ministries about international assistance objectives and priorities.

The creation of the China International Development Cooperation Administration (*Zhongguo Guoji Fazhan Hezuo Shu*, hereafter CIDCA) in March 2018 was precisely aimed at alleviating the tensions between both ministries in this area in establishing a specialized agency in charge of development assistance. First headed by a former Vice-President of the National Development and Reform Commission (Wang Xiaotao), the CIDCA has been managed since April 2021 by Luo Zhaohui, a former Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs. And among his three deputies, one is a diplomat (Deng Boqing) and another one comes from the Ministry of Commerce (Zhou Liujun). These leadership changes underscore an effort to give more say to the Foreign Ministry in this area. However, the CIDCA personnel has remained rather small (around 100) and does not have representatives in Chinese embassies overseas. Moreover, the Ministry of Commerce has kept control on the development assistance budget and it is its representatives in Chinese embassies (the trade section) who continue to manage it.

b) *Frictions between the FAC and the CMC, or between the diplomats and the soldiers*: on issues as the South China Sea or the East China Sea (Senkaku-Diaoyu), the division of labor between the two leading bodies is far from being always clear, leading to possible lack of coordination or synchronization. Besides, it is uncertain that the CMC is ready to share with the FAC all the intelligence or data about military capabilities and operations that the latter would need to make informed decisions.

Other sources of friction do probably exist but at this stage are more speculative. For example, if Xi relies mainly on the FAC to decide about foreign policy matters, the BPSC and even the PB may feel sidelined and put pressure on him to make sure that they remain the ultimate decision-making body on major foreign policy matters. However, we don't have any evidence of such frictions; and in view of Xi's power concentration and opposition to collective leadership, such a push-back is rather unlikely.

Likewise, the division of labor between the Foreign Ministry and the CCP International Liaison Department (ILD) is not always clear as the later, while focusing on developing party-to-party relations outside of China, is also sometimes in charge of delicate issues as relations with North Korea, Vietnam and Palestine. But no signs of tensions between the two administrations have been seen. It should be added that on several occasions the ILD has been headed by a former diplomat, Dai Bingguo before 2003 and Song Tao since 2015, facilitating communication and coordination with the Foreign Ministry.

7. Which individuals other than Xi Jinping have the most important role in the foreign policy decision-making process? What changes, if any, do you expect in this regard from the upcoming 20th Party Congress and following National People's Congress?

I have already answered this question above. Let me summarize here who in my view are the most influential individuals in terms of foreign policy decision-making. The first one is Yang Jiechi, the second one, Ding Xuexiang, and the third one probably Wang Yi. Nonetheless, other leaders as Wang Qishan, Xu Qiliang, and to a lesser extent Li Keqiang, Li Zhanshu, Wang Yang and Han Zheng have some say in this area, and on particular issues. For example, chairing China's People's Political Consultative Conference, the top united front assembly, Wang Yang, who is also vice-chair of the Taiwan LSG, is likely to have a meaningful say only on the relations across the Taiwan Strait. Likewise, Han Zheng is closely associated to decisions relative to the BRI but not to other questions. Finally, although less involved in foreign affairs since the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Wang Huning has continued, in his capacity of FAC member, to also exert some influence in this area.

8. What changes to China's posture abroad, if any, do you expect to see in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the 20th Party Congress and following National People's Congress?

Two major variables will impact on China's posture abroad in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress: the domestic economic situation and the level of Xi Jinping's power consolidation. These two factors are somewhat linked to each other but need to be considered separately.

If the economy continues to slowdown and financial problems accumulate, the Chinese government may opt for a less assertive and more accommodating foreign policy. Already criticized within the Party, China's Wolf Warrior diplomacy may be toned down. But we should not expect major changes in Beijing's international posture.

It is very likely that Xi's stature in the Party will continue to consolidate after the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress due to take place in the fall of 2022. It is unknown and probably unlikely that Xi appoints a successor on this occasion. Yet, at least 11 of the 25 BP members and three of the seven BPSC members will retire and need to be replaced. The major choice to be made will be China's next Premier, who will be formally elected at the following NPC meeting in March 2023. Chongqing Party Secretary Chen Ming'er and Shanghai Party Secretary Li Qiang are among the possible candidates. Han Zheng, in view of his age (he was born in 1954), is a less likely candidate. In any event, Xi will probably promote officials who are ready to carry on his more assertive international posture.

As far as top foreign policy actors are concerned, both Yang Jiechi (born in 1950) and Wang Yi (1953) will step down in 2022-2023, leaving the stage to younger and not necessarily more flexible diplomats. Among the rising stars of the Foreign Ministry, I would cite again Vice-Minister and former FAC Office deputy director Le Yucheng (1963). Alternate Member of the CCP Central Committee since 2017, Le has



demonstrated in his public statements a clear willingness to stick to Wang Yi's aggressive diplomatic style.

9. The Commission is mandated to make policy recommendations to Congress based on its hearings and other research. What recommendations for legislative action would you make based on the topic of your testimony?
  - The U.S. Congress should ask the U.S. Government to reach out all the key actors of China's foreign policy, including the FAC Office and the NSC Office's key leaders (director and deputy directors), better understand their respective structure, staff and role, and report to the Congress about its findings.
  - The U.S. Congress should ask the U.S. Government to establish a direct channel of communication with the Director of the CCP General Office, whoever this individual is, as he (or who knows she) is one of the few officials who enjoy direct access to Xi Jinping, and report to Congress about these interactions.
  - The U.S. Congress should ask the U.S. Government to open, in one way or another, a channel of communication with the CCP International Liaison Office, today headed by Song Tao. Although this body concentrates on party-to-party relations, it has real expertise on many international issues, manages a number of delicate relations and also influences foreign policy decision-making (as we have seen, its director sits in the FAC), and to report to Congress about these interactions.
  - Finally, the U.S. Congress should ask the U.S. Government to intensify its effort to deepen its dialogue and establish crisis management mechanisms with the CMC, especially its top leaders, today Xu Qiliang, Zhang Youxia and Li Zuopeng, as the CMC is the leading body that would be on the forefront in case of incident or military crisis between the U.S. and China, and report to Congress about it.