

# More Already on the Central Committee's Leading Small Groups

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The Xi Jinping leadership has substantially revised the array of top-level leading small groups that prevailed under the Hu Jintao leadership. In doing so the Xi leadership has unveiled aspects of the groups' role in the policymaking and policy implementation, their leadership, and their varieties in the broader political order. Although much about these informal groups remains obscure, the steps toward transparency shed new light on the leadership's policy processes.

A decade ago, information about the Central Committee's (CC) leading small groups was exceedingly difficult to come by. The groups were mentioned in passing only rarely in PRC media. References appeared with only slightly greater frequency in the PRC-owned newspapers in Hong Kong. The blackout on the groups' provenance, leadership and staffing, functions, and history was nearly total, and analysis of their purposes, membership, and operations could be pieced together only by assembling the slivers of references to them over the decades down to the mid-2000s.

Reference to the party's leading small groups in PRC media began to emerge more regularly in the late Hu Jintao period as one of several steps undertaken by his leadership toward greater transparency.<sup>1</sup> The Xi leadership has followed these precedents and expanded them, evidently as part of its effort to press the broad array of reforms signaled at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012 and endorsed at the 18<sup>th</sup> CC's Third Plenum in November 2013.

Significant new information about the CC's leading small groups has come from several sources. Most directly, for example, the state news agency Xinhua has begun occasional reporting on meetings of some of these leadership groups. In addition, Xinhua, the party newspaper *People's Daily* and its website, and other PRC media have recently carried partial lists of such groups and their leaders, in addition to limited but still unprecedented explications of their role in the policy process. The CC's leading small groups have also received specialist attention in Chinese academic journals.<sup>2</sup> Finally, at least one book-length treatment of the groups' role and history has been published.<sup>3</sup>

## The Varieties and Characteristics of Small Groups

The new sources make plain that “small groups”—whether “leading small groups” or “coordination small groups”—flourish throughout the political order as informal, off-the-books mechanisms to coordinate implementation of policies established by their supervising leaderships. Small groups are used in the party apparatus and government hierarchy down to the township level, and they are used in the People's Liberation Army down through military district headquarter levels. The sources suggest that they are more ubiquitous the farther down the institutional hierarchy one looks.<sup>4</sup>

According to the analysis by Nankai University Professor Zhou Wang, whose work is widely cited in other sources, leading and coordination small groups may be sorted into three types:

- *Permanent small groups*: Established to deal with broad policy sectors and issues of abiding strategic importance, these are the most important, highest-ranking, and most authoritative. Examples include CC's leading small groups that deal with foreign policy, Taiwan affairs, the economy, and other issues and several State Council groups, such as the State Science, Technology, and Education Leading Small Group.
- *Term-oriented (阶段性) small groups*: These are established to coordinate a specific task. Their term may vary considerably, depending on the nature of the task they supervise. Examples include the CC Nuclear Program Leading Small Group, established in 1955 coincident with Soviet collaboration in the PRC's nuclear effort, and the CC Beijing Olympics Preparation Leading Small Group, initially headed by Zeng Qinghong and after 2007 by Xi Jinping. This category may also include the CC leading small groups established since the late 1990s to manage party-wide study "activities," such as the "three stresses" campaign of the late Jiang Zemin years, the campaign to study the CCP's "advanced nature" in 2005–2006, the campaign to study the "scientific development concept" in 2009–2010, and the current intra-party campaign to study the mass line. The current CC Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, established to coordinate implementation of the reform program adopted at the November 2013 18<sup>th</sup> CC Third Plenum by 2020, likely falls into this category. These groups normally dissolve once their appointed task has been completed.
- *Task-oriented small groups*: These short-term groups are the most common, especially at lower levels of the political order. They are usually established to manage natural disasters, large-scale social eruptions, and other emergency situations. One central-level example was the leading small group led by former premier Wen Jiabao to manage the relief effort for the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake.

Small groups also differ structurally and in their authority relationships. Some leading small groups link directly together with counterparts above them and below. The CC Finance and Economy Leading Small Group, for example, connects with corresponding finance and economy leading small groups operating under the aegis of provincial party committees. Other groups operate mainly at only one level and interface with more limited purview with counterparts at lower levels, such as the State Science, Technology and Education Leading Small Group. Finally others are "self-subordinating" and have no interface with counterparts at other levels. Examples of this type are the CC Coordinating Small Groups for Hong-Kong-Macao, Xinjiang, and Tibet Affairs, which link only to the party Politburo and its Standing Committee.

Structurally, leading small groups are configured around a vertical axis composed of the presiding leader, the presiding or convening office (牵头部门), and the group's general

office. Because the group's presiding leader and the group general office shoulder most of the responsibility, they tend to dominate the proceedings. The group's members vary in terms of their relative weight, such that some attend meetings mostly to report decisions back to their home offices.

Leading small groups are not formalized bodies in any meaningful sense. They lack bureaucratic documentation, they lack standard operating rules, and they cannot appoint their own members. They occupy no dedicated office space as a group, nor do they hang out a shingle. They have no dedicated budget to expend funds. They have no legal authority to issue formal orders to other offices; instead, they rely on superior or related institutions to issue documents that circulate internally within the political order and that do have binding force. They meet only a few times over the course of a year, mainly to hear reports.

At the same time, the general offices of leading small groups have serious bureaucratic power. Normally, a leading small group's general office is part of the sponsoring institution's general office. Thus, for example, the general office of the CC Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform is in fact two bureaus under the CC Policy Research Office, led by Wang Huning. Leading small group general offices have dedicated office space, a roster of personnel, and an operating budget for administrative expenses. Although they cannot implement anything on their own, they can levy work on other offices.

In the reform era, leading and coordination small groups have proliferated, sometimes because term- and task-oriented groups take on new missions beyond those that they were established to complete. This has led to occasional efforts to regulate and reduce them. The State Council in 1981 had 44 such groups, but by 1988 there were 75 and 85 by 1991. They were reduced through dissolution in 1993 to 26, and then to 19 under then premier Zhu Rongji in 1998. By 2003, they were back up to 23 and in 2008 to 29, a number that did not include all small groups under the State Council.

## The CC Permanent Leading Small Groups

The CC's permanent leading small groups were first established in 1958 as part of a larger effort to institutionalize policy-making and implementation under a collective leadership system as the CCP shifted from the main task of creating socialist political and economic order in China ("socialist transformation") to the "general task" of economic modernization ("socialist construction" or "building socialism").<sup>5</sup> Permanent leading small groups were established in five major policy sectors that functioned more or less stably until the entire leadership system collapsed, and the leading groups with it, with onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

Restoration of the leading small groups in the post-Mao period accompanied Deng Xiaoping's effort to revive the leadership system of the 1956–58 period. The CC Finance and Economy Leading Group was established immediately in March 1980 after the Fifth Plenum's restoration of the party Secretariat, with soon-to-be Premier Zhao Ziyang as its head. The CC Politics and Law Leading Group was revised as a committee, with

Politburo member and legal system architect Peng Zhen at its helm. The CC Foreign Affairs Leading Group emerged in 1981, led after the 1982 Party congress by Politburo Standing Committee member Li Xiannian. A new CC Taiwan Affairs Leading Group was established in January 1980, a year after Beijing's launch of its "peaceful reunification" pitch to Taipei on New Year's Day 1979 and with Politburo member Deng Yingchao (Zhou Enlai's widow) as director.

This system continued without modification until 1987, when several new adjustments to the overarching leadership system emerged in the wake of General Secretary Hu Yaobang's demotion. Among the changes, a new Propaganda and Ideology Leading Group was established—perhaps out of a concern to combat "bourgeois liberalization," and a new Party-Building Leading Group was created, perhaps to step up party reform in conjunction with the 13<sup>th</sup> Party Congress mandate for "separating of party and government." In addition, and notably, leadership of at least five of the then six permanent leading groups was concentrated in the hands of Politburo Standing Committee members. Thus, newly appointed party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang served as head of finance and economy, Li Peng was in charge of the foreign affairs and perhaps Taiwan leading small groups, Qiao Shi presided over security as head of politics and law, Hu Qili was head of propaganda and ideology, and Song Ping was in charge of party-building. The even distribution of these policy sector responsibilities among the Politburo Standing Committee members appears to have been intended to reinforce the foremost decision-making role of that body and the collective leadership principles by which it was intended to operate. This leadership system in most respects was sustained through the 1989–2002 tenure of Jiang Zemin as general secretary. The only significant modification was that after 1992, the new leader responsible for security work as head of the Politics and Law Committee—Ren Jianxin—was no longer concurrently a Politburo Standing Committee member.

The role of the primary leading groups during Hu Jintao's tenure as general secretary solidified this collective leadership power structure and policy process. Leadership of all of the top-level permanent leading groups—now ten, with the creation of the National Security Leading Group in 2000—was again distributed among the members of the Politburo Standing Committee, with Hu himself leading four, as table 1 (next page) shows.

### *The Functions of the CC's Permanent Leading Small Groups*

According to the new sources, the CC's leading small groups serve the policymaking process in two ways—policy formulation and policy implementation. With regard to the former role, once the leadership initiates the policymaking process, the relevant leading small group and its general office manage the preparatory work of enlisting the collaboration among relevant CC departments, State Council ministries and agencies, components of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and other institutions, organizing relevant inspection work, and soliciting expert recommendations. The group then drafts a report for the leadership and formulates policy proposals to prepare for a final decision by the leadership. The leading small group's role in this process is critical in ironing out a consensus on the policy issue among competing and

clashing views among the collaborating institutions. In addition, according to Zhou Wang, “because the presiding member of the leading small group is also a principal member of the leadership collective, the policy proposals that the leading small group formulates will all essentially be adopted” and will approximate what appears in the formal policy document that is finally publicized.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1**

*The CC’s Permanent Leading & Coordination Small Groups under Hu Jintao*

<i>Leading Group</i>	<i>Director 2002–2007</i>	<i>Director 2008–Present</i>
Finance & Economy	Hu Jintao	Hu Jintao
Politics and Law	Lou Gan	Zhou Yongkang
National Security	Hu Jintao	Hu Jintao
Foreign Affairs	Hu Jintao	Hu Jintao
Taiwan Affairs	Hu Jintao	Hu Jintao
Propaganda & Ideology	Li Changchun	Li Changchun
Party-Building	Zeng Qinghong?	Xi Jinping
Hong Kong & Macao	Zeng Qinghong	Xi Jinping
Tibet Affairs	Jia Qinglin	Jia Qinglin
Xinjiang Affairs	Lou Gan	Zhou Yongkang

The policy preparatory role of a CC leading small group is secondary to its policy implementation role. Implementation is made easier by the group’s effort to work out a consensus on the policy issue among relevant institutions during the preparatory phase.

As described in recent sources, the role of the CC Finance and Economy Leading Small Group (FELSG) is typical.<sup>7</sup> The focus of the group is preparations for the central conference on economic work convened annually in December and for the Politburo’s semi-annual review of the economy and economic policy in July. The FELSG also coordinates with the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) on formulating annual and five-year plan proposals.

In performing these tasks, the full group normally meets quarterly, while the FELSG General Office organizes much of the actual work. The General Office, for example, organizes relevant CC departments, State Council ministries and bodies, and experts to draft the report of the party general secretary (who serves concurrently as FELSG director) to the conference. After the conference, the General Office coordinates with the State Council General Office, which, with the NDRC, drafts the premier’s work report to the annual session in March of the National People’s Congress. The premier’s report thus incorporates the conference’s main conclusions and its approach to the coming year’s economic policies.

The FELSG General Office is thus the leading group’s standing body. It maintains dedicated offices, which the leading group itself does not, in Zhongnanhai, where it shares a building with the general office staff of the CC Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group. The FELSG General Office director is normally a deputy minister of the NDRC, with which it frequently collaborates. It subsumes six teams under its aegis—an overall

policy team, a macro team, a finance and trade team, an economy and trade team, a rural team, and a secretariat.

## The CC Permanent Leading Small Groups under the Xi Jinping Leadership

The overarching structure of CC leading small groups under Xi Jinping and the allocation of leaders to direct them is a revision, not a radical break, from the leadership work system that prevailed under Hu Jintao. The Hu system was itself a revision of the system under Jiang Zemin. Table 2 lists the CC leading small group system under Xi.

**Table 2**

*The CC's Permanent Leading & Coordination Small Groups under Xi Jinping*

<i>Leading Group</i>	<i>Director</i>	<i>Deputy directors</i>
Comprehensive Deepening Reform	Xi Jinping	Li Keqiang, Liu Yunshan, Zhang Gaoli
Finance & Economy	Xi Jinping	Li Keqiang
State Security Committee	Xi Jinping	Li Keqiang, Zhang Dejiang
Foreign Affairs	Xi Jinping*	Li Yuanchao*
Taiwan Affairs	Xi Jinping*	Yu Zhengsheng*
Internet Security & Informatization	Xi Jinping	Li Keqiang*, Liu Yunshan*
Propaganda & Ideology	Liu Yunshan	Liu Yandong*
Party-Building	Liu Yunshan	Wang Qishan*, Zhao Leji*
Hong Kong & Macao	Zhang Dejiang	
Tibet Affairs	Yu Zhengsheng	
Xinjiang Affairs	Yu Zhengsheng	

\*Names marked with an asterisk are not confirmed in official PRC sources.

The most notable departure so far under Xi Jinping is the creation of an overarching leading group to guide the sprawling package of reforms authorized at the Third Plenum on November 2013. The CC Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform (CDRLSG) appears to preside over some of the longstanding CC leading small groups and delegates to them as subgroups implementation of parts of the comprehensive reform package. Thus, the FELSG General Office appears to have been incorporated as the core of the one of the CDRLSG's six subgroups—the Economy and Ecology Subgroup, while the CC Propaganda and Ideology Leading Small Group's director and deputy—Liu Qibao and Liu Yandong—have been appointed over another, the CDRLSG's Cultural System Reform Subgroup. The CC leading small groups and their general offices are likely not entirely swallowed up by the CDRLSG and continue their longstanding roles outside it. The Third Plenum reforms are slated to be completed by 2020—a point underscored by Xi Jinping in presiding over the CDRLSG's first meeting on 22 January, and so the group will presumably expire at that point.

Another change in the CC leading small group system under Xi Jinping is the displacement of the CC Politics and Law Committee by the new State Security Commission, also directed by Xi. The Politics and Law Committee under Hu Jintao had

been directed first by Luo Gan and then by Zhou Yongkang, both of whom had been Politburo Standing Committee members. The Committee still functions, presumably under the aegis of the new State Security Committee, and is directed only by a Politburo member, Meng Jianzhu.

The last notable change is the appointment of Yu Zhengsheng as director of the CC Xinjiang Work Coordination Small Group. The group under Hu Jintao had been presided over by the Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of internal security serving concurrently as head of the CC Politics and Law Committee, Luo Gan and later Zhou Yongkang. In contrast, Yu is chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the overarching united front body. Yu's assignment of responsibility for the Xinjiang coordination group thus comports with his concurrent leadership of the CC Tibet Work Coordination Group. The Tibet coordination group has always been directed by the Politburo Standing Committee member in charge of the united front, not internal security. How this change relates to the changes in the security sector is not clear.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An effort to piece together emerging data from this and earlier periods is the author's "The CCP Central Committee's Leading Small Groups," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 26 (September 2008), on which this article builds.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see: Zhou Wang 周望, "中国'小组'政治模式解析" (An analysis of China's "Small Group" political model), *云南社会科学 (Yunnan Social Science)* 2010 No.3, 14–18; Lai Jingping 赖静萍, "领导小组制度的建构、延续与变迁——以中央防治血吸虫病工作领导小组为个案" (The establishment, course, and evolution of the Leading Small Group Institutions—Taking the CC Schistosomiasis Treatment Leading Small Group as a case), *理论与改革 (Theory and Reform)*, 2012 No.1, 62–66; Lai Jingping 赖静萍, "当代中国党政关系的演进与现代国家的成长——以领导小组的历史变迁为观察点" (The progress of the party-government relationship in contemporary China and the maturity of the modern state—From the perspective of the historical evolution of Leading Small Groups), *江苏社会科学 (Jiangsu Social Science)*, 2009 No.2, 109–115; and Lai Jingping 赖静萍, "制度化与有效性的平衡——领导小组与政府部门协调机制研究" (Institutionalization and effective balancing—A study of Leading Small Groups and coordinating mechanisms in state offices), *公共管理 (Public Management)*, 2011 No.8, 314–26.

<sup>3</sup> Zhou Wang 周望, *中国'小组机制'研究 (Studies on China's "Small Group Mechanism")*, Tianjin People's Press, 2010. The author has not yet seen this book.

<sup>4</sup> The discussion in this section draws on the following: Zhou Wang, "An Analysis of China's 'Small Group' Political Model" (see endnote 2); Qian Hanping 钱昊平, Shi Xisheng 实习生, and Yang Jiaqi 杨佳秋, "'领导小组'怎样领导?" (How do Leading Small Groups lead?, *南方周末 (Southern Weekend)*, 5 Sept 2012; "图解'小组机制'" (Graphically explaining "Small Group Mechanisms," *Renminwang*, 8 July 2013, accessed at <http://www.politic.people.com.cn/n/2013/0708/c99014-22112002.html>); and "'领导小组'是怎样的议事协调机构?" (What sort of deliberative and coordinating bodies are "Leading Small Groups"?), *北京青年报 (Beijing Youth Daily)*, 10 July 2013.

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<sup>5</sup> The evolution of CC leading small groups is recounted in detail in “The CCP Central Committee’s Leading Small Groups,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 26 (September 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Zhou Wang, *op.cit.*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> This discussion draws on Zhou Wang, *op.cit.*, 17, and “揭密中央财经领导小组:总书记任组长,每季度开会” (Revealing the CC Finance and Economy Leading Small Group: The General Secretary serves as director and it meets quarterly), *21世纪经济道报 (21<sup>st</sup> Century Economic Herald)*, 19 June 2014, accessed at <http://money.163.com/14/0619/15/9V43FVJQ00251LKI.html?frp21>.