

China's New "Black Box": Problems and Prospects for the Central National Security Commission

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Abstract

China's establishment of a Central National Security Commission (CNSC) in late 2013 was a potentially transformative event in the evolution of China's national security decision-making structure. Yet, as of mid-2017, few details about this organization and its activities have been released, leading to continuing questions about its likely role and functions in the Chinese system. Based on an analysis of numerous authoritative but under-utilized Chinese sources, this article addresses the rationale, prospects and implications of the CNSC. It argues that the organization is both a fulfilment of a long-held desire by many in China for a centralized, permanent national security deliberation forum and also a reflection of the unique challenges facing China in the 21st century. Contrary to existing analyses, which argue that the CNSC is likely to be focused primarily on domestic security tasks, the article contends that it is more likely to play a major role in both internal *and* external security affairs. Moreover, the article argues that if certain obstacles can be addressed, the CNSC may have broad implications in areas ranging from China's crisis response capability to the role played by the Chinese Communist Party general secretary in the national security decision-making process. The conclusion recaps the findings and suggests avenues for further research.

Keywords: Central National Security Commission; People's Liberation Army; Chinese civil–military relations; Chinese foreign policy; Chinese domestic politics; national security

China's Central National Security Commission (*Zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui* 中央国家安全委员会, CNSC hereafter), has puzzled foreign observers since its establishment at the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress in November 2013. On one hand, it could be one of the most important new elements of China's national security decision-making system: it is chaired by Xi Jinping 习近平 and vested with the authority to “make overall coordination

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for major matters and important tasks involving national security.”¹ This is the culmination of more than twenty years of effort by Chinese reformers to institute a mechanism similar to the US National Security Council (NSC) that would improve bureaucratic coordination over national security affairs and, potentially, strengthen China's ability to respond to foreign and domestic crises.

On the other hand, China has released virtually no detailed information on this organization, such as its staff structure or full membership, since its inception. No meetings of the CNSC have been publicized in the Chinese media since its initial session in April 2014, and it has not been referenced as having actually played a role in overseeing China's response to any recent crisis, such as the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Yemen in March 2015,² or in responding to the August 2015 toxic chemical explosions in Tianjin.³ The vacuum created by this lack of information has often been filled by speculation and gossip, even within China.⁴ In effect, nearly four years after its establishment, the CNSC remains a “black box” institution.

This essay builds on prior research by addressing three questions. First, what scope of authority does the CNSC possess? Will it concentrate on domestic security missions, as some scholars contend, or will it also be responsible for transnational and external security issues? Second, what bureaucratic challenges will the organization help rectify, and how will it do so? Third, what are the primary obstacles facing the CNSC, and what are the prospects of it being able to overcome them? To answer these questions, the essay draws on authoritative Chinese documents and statements as well as on a number of under-utilized, but credible, non-authoritative sources. These primarily include assessments by senior Chinese military and civilian analysts, which demonstrate a range of views on the institution from within China's security community.⁵

The essay makes three arguments. First is that the CNSC has a vast scope of authority that covers domestic, external and transnational security issues. This reflects the expansive definition of national security that has taken hold during the Xi era. Second, the key role of the organization is to facilitate integrated, whole-of-government responses to national security challenges by reducing bureaucratic stove-piping and supervising policy coordination. This is especially helpful in the context of crisis response. Third, challenges to the ability of the CNSC to respond effectively to national security challenges could include elite resistance, an unwieldy internal structure, and an inability to manage coordination between military and civilian agencies. Yet, none of these challenges appear insurmountable, and the CNSC will likely play an increasingly important role in the coming years.

1 Xinhua 2014a.

2 Xinhua 2015b.

3 Xinhua 2015a.

4 See, e.g., Hu, Qingyun, and Guo 2015.

5 For excellent previous analyses, see, e.g., Lampton 2015; Erickson and Liff 2016; Hu, Weixing 2016; You 2016.

Scope of Authority

Official Chinese statements are vague on the CNSC's intended scope of authority. The Third Plenum decision noted only that China would establish a "National Security Commission" that would "ensure national security."⁶ In January 2014, the CCP Politburo added the word "Central" to the organization's name, clarifying that it is a Party organ, which would report to the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), rather than a state organ. The Politburo invested the CNSC with the authority to "make overall coordination for major matters and important tasks involving national security."⁷ The meeting also announced that the CNSC would be led by Xi Jinping, with State Council premier Li Keqiang 李克强 and National People's Congress (NPC) chairman Zhang Dejiang 张德江 serving as vice-chairmen.

Less clear is the specific range of issues over which the CNSC would have oversight. Some foreign scholars have argued that it will likely have a domestic security focus, orchestrating China's approach to internal unrest.⁸ One indication of this was that it was discussed in a section of the Third Plenum decision related to social stability challenges.⁹ However, other analysts suggest that it will take broad responsibility over both foreign and domestic security affairs.¹⁰ As David Lampton explains, "there is no clear separation in Chinese thinking between internal and external security."¹¹ For instance, Chinese sources often portray domestic discord as the result of foreign subversion, while terrorism might have both internal and external dimensions.¹² This suggests that the CNSC might adopt a broader mandate to allow it to focus comprehensively on these types of issues.

As a starting point for assessing this issue, it is necessary to place the CNSC in the broader context of reforms to China's national security system under Xi Jinping.¹³ Authoritative Chinese media reports refer to an emerging "three-in-one national security system" (*san wei yi ti de guojia anquan tixi* 三位一体的国家安全体系) in which the CNSC is aligned with two other core elements.¹⁴ These are the "overall national security outlook" (*zongti guojia anquan guan* 总体国家安全观), which Xi promulgated at the first session of the CNSC in April 2014,¹⁵ and the National Security Law (*guo'an fa* 国安法), which the NPC passed in July 2015.¹⁶ By understanding the scope of these other elements, it is possible to infer the range of issues relevant to the CNSC.

6 Xinhua 2013b.

7 Xinhua 2014a.

8 You 2016; Sun 2013a.

9 Xinhua 2013b.

10 Lampton 2015, Erickson and Liff 2016.

11 Lampton 2015, 764.

12 See, e.g., State Council Information Office of the PRC 2015.

13 For a definition of "national security system" in the US context, see Lamb and Bond 2016, 1–2.

14 Hua 2015.

15 Xinhua 2014b.

16 National Security Law of the People's Republic of China, 1 July 2015 (translation available from the China Copyright and Media blog at <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2015/07/01/national-security-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>). Another element of the new national security

In particular, both the "outlook" and the National Security Law define national security in exceptionally broad terms. Xi explained the "outlook" with the following language:

In implementing the overall national security concept, we not only need to stress external security but also internal security. We not only attach importance to traditional security but also non-traditional security. We build an integrated national security system encompassing political security, homeland security, military security, economic security, cultural security, social security, scientific and technological security, information security, ecological security, resource security, nuclear security, and others.¹⁷

The National Security Law provided a similarly broad conceptualization of "national security," defining the term as:

The state in which China's political power, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity, the well-being of the nation, the sustainable development of the economy and society and other important national interests are relatively free of any danger or domestic or foreign threat, and the ability to maintain a continuously secure state.¹⁸

The law continues by noting that, "In national security work, it is necessary to holistically consider external security and internal security, homeland security and national security, traditional security and non-traditional security, and self-security and common security."¹⁹ The document then devotes articles to a range of specific issues including territorial defence, economic and financial security, food security, environmental security, nuclear and space security, "innovation" (including intellectual property rights), religious activities, cultural affairs, and ethnic relations within China.²⁰

A *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 (*People's Daily*) article explains how the CNSC, "outlook" and National Security Law are intended to fit together:

The CNSC makes overall plans for internal and external matters related to national security. It is the nerve centre of the central authorities responsible for making decisions and coordination for national security affairs. The overall national security concept guides national security work in all domains. It ensures that the national security work of all departments and all domains can maintain efficient operation by focusing on safeguarding the core interests and other major interests of the state. The new National Security Law is the basic law governing national security work. It reflects the overall national security concept and provides a solid legal basis for the new national security system and its work.²¹

Other Chinese sources likewise draw linkages between the constituent elements of the national security system. For instance, Qu Xing 曲星, former president of the Chinese Institute for International Studies (CIIS), which is the research arm of

footnote continued

system may be a "national security strategic outline" (*guojia anquan zhanlüe gangyao*) that was adopted by the Politburo in January 2015. Although no details of this document were released, Xinhua mentioned it alongside the CNSC, the "overall national security concept," and the draft National Security Law. See Xinhua 2015b.

17 Xinhua 2014b.

18 National People's Congress Online 2015.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Hua 2015.

the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), notes that the “overall national security concept” more precisely “defines the mission and function of the CNSC.”²² In short, the CNSC supports a conceptual and legal rendering of “national security” that includes not only domestic security challenges but also a very broad range of transnational and external issues as well.

China’s Changing Security Environment

To understand China’s evolving national security system, and the CNSC’s place within it, it is necessary to review how Chinese threat perceptions have evolved in recent years. Xi himself justified the decision to establish the CNSC by referring to the “dual pressures” of protecting national security and development interests *externally* and safeguarding political and social security *internally*.²³ Similarly, at the first meeting of the CNSC in April 2014, Xi argued that “China now faces the most complicated situation it ever has, internally and externally.”²⁴ Xi has expanded on various foreign and domestic security challenges facing China in other venues as well. For example, in a Politburo study session in April 2014, Xi pointed to terrorism as an increasing threat to internal stability.²⁵ At the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in November 2014, he referred to unnamed “risks” that would require China to skilfully “defuse potential crises.”²⁶

China’s 2015 Defence White Paper, titled *China’s Military Strategy*, contains a more detailed, and still highly authoritative, analysis of the country’s national security situation. While it affirms that the “window of strategic opportunity” for China to pursue “peaceful development” remains open, it also identifies a broad range of enduring and emerging security challenges including maritime threats, the US rebalance to Asia, tensions on the Korean Peninsula, terrorism, separatism, the Taiwan independence movement, natural disasters and epidemics, threats to energy and resources, and dangers facing Chinese “institutions, personnel and assets” abroad. Echoing the language in the National Security Law, it also notes that security and development cannot be separated, and that “traditional and non-traditional security threats are interwoven.”²⁷

At a less authoritative level, many Chinese security analysts further specify these concerns in their writings on the CNSC. A notable example is a piece written by Major General Li Shengquan 李升泉, director of the political department of the PLA National Defence University (NDU), published in the *Study Times*, the official journal of the CCP Central Party School. In his article, Li outlines five key security trends necessitating the CNSC. These are:

22 Pang 2014.

23 Xinhua 2013a (emphasis added).

24 “Xi outlines new strategy to protect nation,” *China Daily*, 15 April 2014.

25 Xinhua 2014c.

26 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2014.

27 State Council Information Office of the PRC 2015.

- "The international system has entered a period of rapid changes and deepening adjustments, and international security risks and variables have grown";
- "China's national interests have quickly expanded overseas," and those interests are increasingly "unstable" and "uncertain";
- "The United States has strategically rebalanced the Asia-Pacific," and threats "around China's borders, especially from the maritime direction" have grown;
- China's "political security" and "national sovereignty" are facing the challenges of "terrorism," "separatism" and "extremism";
- External intelligence activities and other foreign threats to China's internal security have increased, "along with the spread of information and network technology."²⁸

Other PRC security analysts likewise argue that the CNSC must confront a range of internal and external security challenges. For example, Chen Xiangyang 陈向阳, deputy director of the Institute of World Politics at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), argues that the CNSC will have to cope with issues such as a growing number of "mass incidents" involving disaffected Chinese citizens, some of which may be supported by "external hostile forces"; enduring threats to China's territorial integrity, such as those posed by the Taiwanese independence movement and separatist activities in Tibet and Xinjiang; energy security challenges, driven in part by China's heavy reliance on foreign oil and natural gas imports; and ecological degradation, compounded by global climate change.²⁹ Senior Colonel Gong Fangbin 公方彬 of the PLA NDU describes several other challenges that require a strong national security apparatus, such as cyber threats, terrorism and the "ideological struggle" taking place between China and the West.³⁰

In addition, Chinese sources highlight the transnational nature of many of the key security challenges facing the country. For instance, Qu Xing describes increasing "butterfly effects" in the global economy, in which an economic crisis in a remote part of the world can have a direct impact on China's internal economic security. Qu also points to terrorism as a transnational concern involving the collaboration of forces both within and outside China's borders.³¹ Likewise, Gao Zugui 高祖贵, a professor in the department of international strategy at the CCP's Central Party School, contends that there is "no clear boundary" between internal and external security issues, arguing that the new CNSC will have to address both.³² Moreover, Senior Colonel Meng Xiangqing 孟祥青, deputy director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at the PLA NDU, argues that:

Domestic security issues are increasingly getting more involved in international factors, and international security issues are having a greater impact on the domestic situation. If some

28 Li, Shengquan 2013.

29 Chen 2013.

30 Gong 2014a.

31 Pang 2014.

32 "Experts discuss National Security Commission," CCTV, 14 November 2013.

internal problem issues are not handled appropriately, they may lead to a chain reaction in the external environment. If some external problem issues are not handled appropriately, they may also lead to an increase in internal factors of instability.³³

Meng concludes by suggesting that such complex problems can only be addressed by marshalling the “unified response of all relevant departments,” which the CNSC is well positioned to do.³⁴

Bureaucratic Coordination and Crisis Response

Within this strategic context, the CNSC was established in November 2013 to strengthen China’s ability to carry out integrated, whole-of-government responses to national security challenges, wherever and in whatever form they may occur. The organization seeks to accomplish this goal by breaking down the stove-pipes that previously prevented effective bureaucratic coordination and that have limited the ability of senior leaders to receive timely and accurate information.³⁵ Addressing these problems would put Beijing in a stronger position to manage the country’s national security affairs, especially in the context of a foreign or domestic crisis.

These are not new objectives. Chinese reformers have called for a permanent national security coordination mechanism for more than twenty years. David Lampton suggests that the idea behind the CNSC was inspired, in part, by former CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin’s 江泽民 October 1997 state visit to the United States, in which Jiang was exposed to the workings of the US NSC.³⁶ Likewise, Michael Swaine observed in 1998 that proponents of a “Chinese NSC” argued that such an entity would “facilitate communication and interaction through the entire national security bureaucracy,” which would, in turn, enhance coordination and control over both the civilian and military aspects of China’s national security work.³⁷ The PRC assessments of China’s responses to the May 1999 accidental bombing of the PRC Embassy in Belgrade by US military aircraft and an April 2001 incident involving a Chinese fighter jet colliding with a US EP-3 surveillance aircraft in the South China Sea as ineffective also motivated some Chinese analysts to advocate for a stronger central institution to manage future crises.³⁸

However, calls for a “Chinese NSC” that would address such problems failed during the Jiang era. Liu Shanying 刘山鹰 of the Institute of Political Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences argues that this failure reflected Jiang’s inability to fully consolidate his authority over the Chinese party-state.³⁹

33 Meng 2013.

34 Ibid.

35 See also Hu, Weixing 2016.

36 Lampton 2015.

37 Swaine 1998, 79–80.

38 Miller, Frank, and Scobell 2005, 233.

39 Wong, Gillian 2013.

A specific concern was that setting up such an organization would transfer too much power from the PBSC, which held final authority over all key decisions, to Jiang as leader of a putative NSC. Instead, a compromise was reached in which a National Security Leading Small Group (NSLSG) was established to steer national security coordination.⁴⁰ Like other central leading groups, this was an ad hoc body that met only when required.⁴¹ For instance, it was convened to help manage China's response to the EP-3 incident.⁴²

The NSLSG suffered from a variety of weaknesses which reduced its effectiveness and importance. A *Renmin ribao* article published shortly after the Third Plenum described the NSLSG (and other ad hoc bodies such as the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group) as too "informal and provisional" to be effective.⁴³ For example:

It is difficult for [these groups] to track, analyse, and coordinate routine affairs as the core national security affairs organs. They also lack enough manpower and resources to respond to sudden incidents as well as to formulate, coordinate and supervise the comprehensive implementation of national security strategy.⁴⁴

Other deficiencies in China's national security decision-making process highlighted in this piece include "disputes over trifling matters" and a tendency of "buck-passing" among China's national security bureaucracies.⁴⁵ Moreover, Zhang Tuosheng 张陀生, a research fellow at the China Foundation for International Strategic Studies, notes that the NSLSG and other ad hoc committees lacked "unified decision-making and coordination" authority, did not possess strong permanent staffs, and did not give sufficient attention to crisis management functions.⁴⁶

Because of the deficiencies of the NSLSG, Chinese scholars continued to advocate for a more institutionalized, NSC-like organization during the 2000s.⁴⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston relates that both civilian think tanks such as CICIR and military institutes put forward proposals.⁴⁸ A 2003 CICIR proposal, for instance, outlined a structure composed of a central decision-making hub that would integrate "all relevant departments" responsible for implementation (such as military and civilian law enforcement), and which would contain an intelligence function to supply timely information to top leaders.⁴⁹ Similarly, You Ji references studies conducted by both the PLA Academy of Military Sciences and NDU during the mid-2000s that envisioned a top-level coordinating mechanism that would integrate military and civilian elements of national power.

40 Sun 2013b; Erickson and Liff 2016, 207.

41 Miller, Alice 2008.

42 Zhang 2011.

43 Hua 2013.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Zhang 2011.

47 Lampton 2015.

48 Johnston 2016, 52–53.

49 Ibid., 52.

He concludes that these studies demonstrate the important role of the PLA in laying the intellectual groundwork for the CNSC.⁵⁰

Strengthening the case for a “Chinese NSC” was the observation that most other major powers possessed some type of permanent coordinating mechanism for national security. Chinese analysts surveyed not only the US NSC but also similar organizations in Russia, India and the United Kingdom.⁵¹ However, analysts were also cognizant of potential differences between a potential Chinese NSC and foreign counterparts. For instance, Gong Fangbin of the PLA NDU writes that, unlike “Western countries,” China is a “country under the leadership of a Communist Party,” and “Party Central will continue to have the highest decision-making power” in any new system.⁵² Similarly, a Xinhua analysis asserted that comparisons to other NSCs were for “reference purposes only.”⁵³

Xi’s explanation of the need for the CNSC reflected arguments that had circulated inside China’s national security community for two decades prior to the Third Plenum.⁵⁴ In his justification of the Third Plenum decision, Xi argues that China requires a “strong and powerful platform for making unified national security plans,” and that the CNSC will “strengthen centralized, unified leadership over national security work.”⁵⁵ Similarly, at the first meeting of the CNSC in April 2014, Xi contended that the purpose of the organization is to establish a “centralized and unified” national security system that would enhance the state’s “leadership over national security work.”⁵⁶ A *Renmin ribao* report similarly argued that the CNSC would “effectively integrate departments and coordinate all the activities related to national security as in a chess game.”⁵⁷

Chinese security analysts reiterate Xi’s contention that the CNSC will be able to improve bureaucratic coordination, but generally they provide no details on how it will do so. For example, Ruan Zongze 阮宗泽, executive vice-president of the CIIS, contends that the organization will enhance coordination of the country’s “previously fragmented” national security bureaucracies.⁵⁸ Similarly, the Central Party School’s Gao Zugui writes that the CNSC will serve as a supra-bureaucratic entity to coordinate the activities of “all departments” in the

50 You 2016 186–87.

51 Wuthnow 2013, 4.

52 “Guofang daxue Gong Fangbin: guo’anwei ying chengdan qi jie jue ‘daguo jueqi fannao’ de renwu” (NDU’s Gong Fangbin: National Security Committee carries the duty of resolving the “trouble of rising powers”), *Renmin ribao* online, 14 November 2013, <http://www.people.com.cn/n/2013/1114/c347407-23539919.html>.

53 “Experts demystify China’s National Security Committee, standard configuration of strong powers,” China News Service, 14 November 2014.

54 Of note, this argument was also apparent in a major essay on China’s foreign relations penned by Chinese state councillor Yang Jiechi just prior to the Third Plenum. In this piece, Yang wrote that: “To better coordinate the country’s domestic and international agenda, the Party Central Committee attaches great importance to a holistic management of foreign affairs. It calls for balanced considerations, overall planning, unified command, and coordinated implementation.” Lampton 2015.

55 Xinhua 2013a.

56 Xinhua 2014b.

57 Ibid.

58 “‘Focus Today’ discusses China’s need to create the National Security Commission,” CCTV, 14 November 2013.

national security arena.”⁵⁹ Senior Colonel Meng Xiangqing of the PLA NDU likewise argues in *Jiefangjun bao* 解放军报 (*People's Liberation Army Daily*) that the CNSC will reduce various coordination problems that have plagued the national security decision-making system:

In some cases, information was scattered; communication was not sufficient and not effective; and functions were performed separately without unified command and coordination. Therefore, in current circumstances, the establishment of the CNSC may achieve the effect of “closing all fingers” and “clenching a fist” by strengthening the collaboration of all relevant departments.⁶⁰

Chinese observers also assert that the CNSC will increase China's crisis response effectiveness. For example, Shan Chunchang 闪淳昌, director of the PRC State Council's “emergency management experts committee,” argues that the CNSC will better enable China to manage the “four major types of sudden incidents” (*si da lei tufa shijian* 四大类突发事件): natural disasters, accidents, public health incidents, and social stability incidents.⁶¹ Likewise, Meng Xiangqing claims that the CNSC will strengthen China's “rapid response capability” as well as its “comprehensive policy implementation capability.”⁶² These authors do not explain how the CNSC will be able to accomplish these feats, but one assumes that it would do so by speeding up the flow of accurate information to policy-makers, enhancing bureaucratic coordination, and improving top-level oversight over the entire process. Andrew Erickson and Adam Liff explain that:

An institution composed of personnel with national security policy expertise and tasked explicitly with discussing national security issues regularly, before a possible crisis, could function more effectively – or at least rapidly provide [the Politburo Standing Committee] with rapid situational and policy option assessment.⁶³

Obstacles

Despite its goals of facilitating effective decision making and promoting stronger bureaucratic coordination, there are several obstacles that could inhibit the CNSC over the coming years. First is the potential for elite resistance. Christopher Johnson points to the failure of the CCP to disclose the full membership of the CNSC as possible evidence that bureaucratic infighting over its composition or authority has not been resolved.⁶⁴ More broadly, some in the CCP are concerned that Xi's efforts to centralize power around himself will undo the lessons learnt from the Mao era during which rule by a single strongman resulted in the catastrophes of the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward. These

59 “Experts discuss National Security Commission,” CCTV, 14 November 2013.

60 Meng 2013.

61 “Guowuyuan canshi Shan Chunchang: Gaozhao fengxian pinggu, cong ju guo jiuzai xiang ju guo jianzai zhuanbian” (State Council advisor Shan Chunchang: improve risk assessments, transform from disaster relief to disaster prevention), *Renmin ribao* online, 18 November 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1118/c1027-23578552.html>.

62 Meng 2013.

63 Erickson and Liff 2016, 208.

64 Johnson 2014, 44–45.

concerns were reflected in an anonymous letter written by Party members calling for Xi's resignation that circulated in March 2016.⁶⁵

However, the prospects for elite resistance have probably been reduced as a result of the anti-corruption campaign within the CCP that began in late 2012. The purge of former PBSC member Zhou Yongkang 周永康, for instance, may have reduced the importance of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (*Zhongyang zhengfawei* 中央政法委) as a centre of power not firmly under Xi's authority. Under Zhou's leadership in the 2000s, this organ played a significant role in domestic security and internal policing. It is therefore possible that Zhou's removal enhanced Xi's ability to consolidate control over the domestic security portfolio within the CNSC.⁶⁶ Moreover, the anti-corruption campaign has put both elite and rank-and-file Party members on notice that opposition to reform, which includes the creation of the CNSC at the Third Plenum in November 2013, will not be tolerated.⁶⁷ The result may be less resistance to its authority among Party elites than might otherwise have been the case.

A second possible obstacle concerns the CNSC's internal decision-making process. The limited available information suggests that the organization has a large membership. Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang and Zhang Dejiang all hold seats, along with other, unnamed officials, on the CNSC standing committee. The CNSC also includes regular members and observers. No membership roster has been formally announced, although its size probably reflects its wide scope of authority. This would necessitate representation from the PLA, the MFA, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and other bureaucratic actors, as well as other senior CCP leaders. For instance, Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission chairman Meng Jianzhu 孟建柱 (who replaced Zhou) is widely believed to be a CNSC member and has often met with NSC-equivalent leaders from foreign countries. Hypothetically, the need to build and maintain consensus among a large and varied group of senior officials could result in slower decisions.

A counter-argument is that *de facto* authority rests firmly with Xi, who has less need than his predecessors to reach consensus among other senior leaders. Christopher Johnson argues that the national security decision-making process during the Jiang and Hu era was based on a system in which ultimate authority was shared by the nine members of the PBSC. Johnson concludes that the decision to establish the CNSC in 2013 in itself indicates that the political reality in China has shifted to allow a greater concentration of power in Xi's hands.⁶⁸ Likewise, David Lampton contends that Xi's position as chairman of the CNSC and other key coordinating mechanisms, such as the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group, has helped

65 Buckley 2016.

66 Lampton 2015, 775–76.

67 Yuen 2014.

68 Johnson 2014.

to solidify his status in and control over Chinese foreign and national security policymaking.⁶⁹ If these assessments are correct, then the large size of the CNSC might not impede decision-making.

Third is the challenge of instituting a professional staff structure that can ensure timely decision making and adequate bureaucratic coordination. This issue is difficult to assess given the lack of available details concerning the CNSC staff. It is believed that the CNSC General Office, responsible for managing day-to-day affairs and providing staff support to CNSC members, is led by Li Zhanshu 栗战书, with Cai Qi 蔡奇 having served as a key deputy until his appointment as Beijing mayor in October 2016.⁷⁰ However, neither Li nor Cai are career national security officials; rather they are political allies of Xi and have previously served as provincial governors and vice-governors, respectively.⁷¹ Much will depend on the ability of the CNSC to recruit and manage a professional staff with expertise across the military, intelligence, diplomatic, economic and social arenas. It is also worth noting that the CNSC has reportedly set up sub-departments for intelligence, strategy, and crisis management; however, whether and how well these offices will function in practice remains to be seen.⁷²

A fourth obstacle concerns interagency coordination. Generally speaking, bureaucratic coordination has become increasingly difficult given the proliferation of national security and foreign policy actors in the Chinese system.⁷³ At the policy implementation level, these include not only traditional actors such as the PLA and MFA but also organizations such as the MSS, MPS and Ministry of Commerce. Given the likely purview of the CNSC over a range of internal and external, and traditional and non-traditional, security issues, the field of actors could expand further to include the finance, environmental and civil affairs ministries, among others. How Li Zhanshu and his associates will attempt to synchronize the efforts of these organizations is unclear, but the task would probably require stronger liaison between the CNSC and the ministries.

A more specific question concerns how the CNSC will facilitate coordination between the PLA and the MFA. In the past, a challenge has been that the senior PLA leadership has ranked higher in the Party hierarchy than the MFA leadership.⁷⁴ This means that the MFA cannot directly compel the PLA to share information or provide assistance. Compounding the problem has been the lack of a sufficiently senior official responsible for interagency coordination. For instance, Dai Bingguo 戴秉国, who served such a role in the Hu era, was outranked by CMC vice-chairmen Xu Caihou 徐才厚 and Guo Boxiong 郭伯雄, both of whom were on the Politburo. In addition, Hu himself was also viewed as

69 Lampton 2015.

70 Johnston 2016, 54, 70.

71 Li, Cheng 2014a; 2014b.

72 Johnston 2016, 54

73 Christensen 2012; Jakobson and Knox 2010.

74 CMC vice-chairmen have frequently served on the Politburo, while foreign ministers typically serve only on the Central Committee.

exercising only weak authority over the PLA, despite serving as CMC chairman from 2004 to 2012.⁷⁵

The CNSC, however, is in a strong position to overcome this challenge. One reason is that Li Zhanshu is a Politburo member and thus on the same bureaucratic level as the two CMC vice-chairmen. Li also possesses considerable informal authority as a close confidant of Xi, and he serves concurrently as director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee, which is essentially the “nerve centre” of the entire party-state.⁷⁶ Moreover, under what has been termed the “CMC chairman responsibility system,” Xi exercises stronger influence within the PLA than Hu.⁷⁷ Party control over the PLA has also been strengthened as a result of the anti-corruption campaign (which targeted both Xu and Guo) and a military reorganization announced in late 2015 and early 2016 that sought, in part, to revitalize the role of the Party in the army.⁷⁸ Thus, the PLA is probably in a weaker position to resist efforts by Party officials to encourage it to share information with and provide other support to the MFA.

A fifth challenge is distinguishing the role of the CNSC from that of other high-level national security mechanisms within the party-state. There are a few different organizations whose functions might have to be de-conflicted with the CNSC. One is the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, which has existed since 1978 as an ad hoc forum for senior leaders to discuss foreign policy challenges and was thought to have contained the same membership as the NSLSG. This group apparently continues to exist, but it is unclear how it relates to the CNSC.⁷⁹ Similarly, the extent to which the CNSC will replace the deliberative functions of the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group (also established in 1978) is not clear.

Also hazy is the division of labour between the CNSC and the CMC. Both are technically branches of the CCP Central Committee and report to the Politburo and the PBSC. Nevertheless, official Chinese sources have not explained the relationship between the two organizations. A PLA spokesman has remarked generally that the CMC will “coordinate closely” with the CNSC and “based on unified arrangements will do a good job together in maintaining the nation’s security.”⁸⁰ Yet this leaves unanswered questions about who will make decisions during a crisis, especially those concerning the use of military force. In a piece published in the *Study Times*, Gong Fangbin writes that the CMC can fully manage China’s responses to traditional security threats, whereas the CNSC will focus more on non-traditional security challenges, such as cyber threats and

75 Saunders and Wuthnow 2016, 6.

76 Li, Cheng 2014.

77 For a discussion, see Mulvenon 2015.

78 Saunders and Wuthnow 2016.

79 Miller, Alice 2015, 75.

80 “2014 nian 4 yue guofangbu liexing jizhewui shilu” (Transcript of the PRC Ministry of National Defence news conference for April 2014), *Renmin wang*, 24 April 2014, <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2014/0424/c1011-24939435.html>.

acts of terrorism.⁸¹ While this is only one scholar's view, it suggests that even some in the PLA are uncertain about how the two organizations will coordinate and what each will do.

Regarding the state apparatus, it is unclear whether and in what circumstances the CNSC will take the place of the State Council and NPC in supervising responses to domestic crises. The State Council has performed this function through its Emergency Management Office since 2006.⁸² Moreover, the National Security Law guarantees that both the State Council and the NPC would possess formal decision-making authority in the event of an "extremely serious incident endangering national security."⁸³ In cases such as the 2015 Tianjin explosion, China's response might be overseen by the State Council with no need for direct CNSC involvement. Moreover, coordination between the CNSC, State Council and NPC is facilitated by the fact that Premier Li Keqiang and NPC chairman Zhang Dejiang serve as CNSC vice-chairmen.⁸⁴

In short, none of the key obstacles facing the CNSC appear to be insurmountable. Xi's personal authority in particular might be sufficient to overcome the challenges of elite resistance, a large membership and ensuring adequate military–civilian coordination, while the presence of other key CCP officials in the organization's leadership and key staff positions (especially Li Zhanshu) will also give it significant organizational status and influence. It might take some time and effort to work out issues at the level of staffing and procedures, as well as to establish a division of labour between the CNSC, CMC, NPC and State Council, but these issues would at most delay the organization's operations, not fundamentally inhibit them.

Implications

Although sometimes regarded as a "work-in-progress," the significance of the CNSC should not be underestimated. At first glance, Xi Jinping is succeeding where both Jiang and Hu failed to create a permanent organization responsible for coordinating Chinese national security policy, especially in the event of a crisis. Once it is fully operational (if it is not already), it will likely play a key role in ensuring that senior leaders have access to timely and accurate information and that decisions are implemented in a uniform and integrated fashion across the Chinese system. This could promote quicker and more effective responses not only to traditional types of crises, such as might occur in the South and East China seas, but also to other large-scale disruptive events, such as a major financial crisis or a major civilian emergency along the lines of the 2015 Tianjin explosion.

81 Gong 2014b.

82 Welch 2015, 89–90.

83 National People's Congress Online 2015. Of note, the National Security Law does not define the responsibilities of the CNSC, since the latter is a Party organ and not a state organ.

84 You 2016, 192.

The creation of a CNSC will probably strengthen (and certainly reflects) Xi Jinping's personal authority over national security affairs, although there remains the possibility of resistance from those who advocate for a consensus-based national security decision-making model. More broadly, the establishment of the organization fits in with a tendency towards centralization of power under Xi. In Christopher Johnson's words, Xi's chairmanship of the CNSC and other top-level coordinating institutions demonstrates that he has "sufficient clout to create structural solutions at the apex of the system to get around foot-dragging at ministerial and organizational levels."⁸⁵

Less clear is whether and how the CNSC will impact the PLA's role in China's national security decision-making process. Michael Swaine argues that the PLA has exercised "limited yet significant" influence over decisions in recent years, primarily by supplying professional military advice to senior leaders in the context of the PBSC, Politburo and ad hoc organizations.⁸⁶ For instance, during the Hu era, two of the NSLG's 13 members were reported to be uniformed PLA officers: the defence minister Liang Guanglie 梁光烈 and deputy chief of the General Staff Ma Xiaotian 马晓天.⁸⁷ Yet Swaine also notes that ultimate decisions over national security strategy have been made by the Party's civilian elite, not by the PLA.⁸⁸

There has been no announcement of PLA representation on the CNSC. At a minimum, PLA views would be taken into account through Xi, who serves as chairman of both the CNSC and the CMC. Xi also has very limited personal experience as a uniformed PLA officer through his experience working as an aide to former Chinese defence minister Geng Biao 耿飚 in the early 1980s. On the other hand, the two CNSC vice-chairmen (Li Keqiang and Zhang Dejiang) are both civilians with no prior military experience.⁸⁹ At the staff level, the same holds true for Li Zhanshu. However, the PLA is probably represented on the CNSC at a senior level and most likely contributes staff to the CNSC General Office, much as the US military seconds personnel to serve rotations on the NSC staff. This arrangement likely further strengthens the PLA's status as a provider of professional expertise within its bureaucratic "lane in the road." There is no indication that the PLA would have a significantly stronger voice on basic strategy formulation as a result of the creation of the CNSC.

For the United States and China's neighbours, the CNSC offers a few potential opportunities. Since the organization will likely play a role in strategy development and crisis management and provide advice directly to senior leaders, there is an incentive for US and foreign interlocutors to strengthen communication and interactions with the CNSC and its staff. This would provide a valuable opportunity not only to gain a better understanding of the dynamics and

85 Johnson 2014, 8.

86 Swaine 2015, 143–46; 2012a; 2012b.

87 Miller, Alice 2015, 76.

88 Swaine 2015, 143.

89 See biographical details on Li Keqiang and Zhang Dejiang at chinavivae.org

processes of Chinese national security policymaking but also to discuss shared challenges and common interests. In a best case scenario, this might involve discussion of confidence-building measures such as a hotline or procedures for information sharing, providing an additional avenue for communication before, during and after a crisis.

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摘要: 中国在 2013 年底设立的中央国家安全委员会 (简称为国安委) 成为了中国国家安全决策结构演变的潜在的改革性的时刻。但是, 截至 2015 年后期, 中国公布了较少关于国安委的结构和行动的信息, 而引起了对于它在中国体系的作用和职能的持续问题。这篇文章采用了各种不常利用的权威性的研究资料而进行了对于国安委的意图, 前途, 和影响力的探索。本篇文章认为国安委的成立不仅实现了建立一个固定的国家安全决策机构长期持有的期望, 也是中国在 21 世纪面临的独特挑战的反映。现有研究分析认为国安委的主要任务集中在国内安全事务, 但本文章却认为组织更有可能发挥内部以及外部安全事务的重大作用。此外, 文章认为, 如果某些障碍能取得解决, 国安委即可影响到各种各样的安全领域, 包括了中国的危机应对能力以及中共总书记在国家安全决策过程中的角色等领域。结论重申结果和提出了进一步研究的领域。

关键词: 国家安全; 委员会; 决策结构; 习近平; 中共中央

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