

China's New "State Security Committee": Questions Ahead by Yun Sun

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The Third Plenary Session of the 18th Communist Party of China Central Committee focused on deepening China's economic and political reform. Among the long list of "to-dos" released after the meeting, the most concrete, and perhaps the most eye-catching, is the establishment of a State Security Committee (SSC). Widely perceived to be the Chinese version of the National Security Council (NSC) of the United States, its creation will have profound implications for China's foreign and security policies.

Establishment of the state security committee ends the 10+ year debate on whether China should have a national security council. China's national security decision-making authority is centralized at the top: the National Security Leading Small Group (NSLSG), comprised of senior leaders and the heads of key government line agencies, is designed to supervise and coordinate the country's national security affairs. The NSLSG is similar to the NSC in that both are interagency coordination forums serving the top leaders. Unlike the NSC, however, the NSLSG is an ad hoc committee without a regular meeting schedule or fixed participants. More importantly, rather than an active administrator of national security affairs like the NSC, the NSLSG is a reactive mechanism for crisis management.

As China expands its global economic and political reach, the country faces increasingly complicated security problems as well as difficulties managing a growing number of foreign policy actors. The costs of not having an institution dedicated to the making and coordination of national security policy has become clear, leading to the proposal to establish a National Security Council. In the early 2000s, outgoing president Jiang Zemin reportedly made the most concrete attempt in that direction: it was aborted as it was perceived to be Jiang's effort to retain influence after his retirement in 2002.

The Third Plenum decision to establish a state security committee is significant for several reasons. Politically, its creation suggests President Xi Jinping is aggressively strengthening his control over foreign and security affairs. Procedurally, the committee would presumably serve as the designer, supervisor, and coordinator of China's national

security policies, streamlining and regularizing national security decision-making and policy consultation processes. Bureaucratically, the expected senior rank of the committee should help rein in actors whose narrow agency interests frequently undermined the country's broader national interest.

However, with just one sentence about the state security committee in the communique, there are more questions than answers. How the roles, structures, and responsibilities of the committee are defined will largely determine whether it will meet expectations and avoid the deficiencies of the NSLSG. First and most importantly, although most analysts assume the committee will focus on China's external national security, there are indications that the committee's priority might be domestic. The official translation of the institution – "state security committee" rather than "national security committee" – suggests an inward focus on the security of the state as a political entity instead of an outward focus on the security of the nation as an international actor. This impression is reinforced by the fact that announcement of the committee is in a paragraph of the communique that discusses China's social stability, the public security system, and resolving domestic social conflicts. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also emphasized terrorism, separatism, and extremism as targets of the committee, which again suggests a domestic focus.

This does not necessarily exclude external national security from the committee's purview. It does raise a key question about its nature and priorities. Given China's rising internal political and social problems and perceived domestic security threats, primarily tasking the committee with domestic state security suggests a major attempt by Beijing to tighten control of society. This could also be Xi's effort to restructure and reform China's domestic security apparatus, a structure shaken by scandals connected to the Bo Xilai case, China's ex-security czar Zhou Yongkang, and espionage cases within the Ministry of State Security in the past two years.

Second, the nature and role of the committee prompt questions about its configuration. If the institution is to cover both internal and external security, its responsibility will overlap with that of the NSLSG (on external security) and of the Commission on Politics and Law (on domestic security), which supervises the Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of State Security. If the new committee is to incorporate and replace both institutions, it would require an overhaul of the superstructure of China's foreign and security apparatus. The current heads of the two institutions, State Councilors Yang Jiechi and Meng Jianzhu, might be appointed to lead the committee's foreign and domestic portfolios, respectively. If so, then the chair of the committee will have to be either Xi Jinping or a Chinese version of the US national security advisor. Politburo member Wang Huning, currently director of the Policy Research Office of the Central Committee, has been a widely speculated candidate for the position.

Inevitably, the committee will have to tackle the civil-military relationship that has in the past hindered coordination of China's external national security activities. Given the power and rank of the Chinese military, bringing it under civilian oversight has been a constant challenge for national security decision-making. For example, the PLA reports operational details to the Central Military Commission, rather than to the NSLSG. The head of the NSLSG, a State Councilor, has had no authority over PLA actions. Therefore, the relationship between the new committee and the PLA as well as the Central Military Commission will be a key issue to observe. If the new committee fails to properly incorporate or effectively manage the military, it is bound to suffer the same constraints and deficiencies of the NSLSG.

Finally, there are different opinions among Chinese analysts as to whether the institution will be a daily functional institution or an ad hoc crisis management team. The reality of the challenges faced by China and the decade-long debate seem to demand the former, which would require a sizable, high-quality staff.

There are rumors that the state security committee is nothing more than a political power play to take down certain politicians. The foreign and security policy communities of China hope for more. The new state security committee will likely overhaul China's security and foreign policy apparatus, and address procedural, bureaucratic, and capacity constraints that hinder policy formulation and coordination. As a rising power with expanding global outreach, China will benefit from an institution that better manages its external strategy. It will be a great disappointment if the committee turns out to be yet another state machine aimed at tighter social control at home.

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