



RETHINKING NATIONAL SECURITY: CHINA'S NEW SECURITY COMMISSION

David Mulrooney

The newly established Central National Security Commission (CNSC) of China held its first meeting on April 15. The inaugural meeting of this body marks a significant milestone in the reorganization of China's bureaucratic structures for handling security issues. This policy brief aims to convey the most important points that are known so far about this meeting and to offer some thoughts as to the commission's relevance and future function.

One of the most significant announcements made at the conclusion of the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC in November of last year was that China would establish a “Central National Security Commission” 中央国家安全委员会 (*Zhongyang Guojia Anquan Weiyuanhui*, or *Guoanwei* 国安委 for short, hereafter referred to as the CNSC) in order to “perfect the national security system and national security strategy and ensure national security.” The idea of establishing a top-level body in China had been under consideration for a long time. It was well known that experts in Chinese research institutions were studying agencies such as the U.S. National Security Council to see what structures could be adapted for use in China.

The announcement was subsequently made in January that the CNSC would be chaired by Xi Jinping and that Li Keqiang and Zhang Dejiang would be its vice-chairmen. These three figures represent the Party (Xi Jinping, General Secretary), the government (Li Keqiang, Premier), and the legislature (Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the NPC), indicating that the new body is intended to co-ordinate security affairs at the highest level across the entire political system in China. Xi Jinping's title as Chairman of the CNSC is now often used in state media as his fourth official position in rank order (the others being General Secretary of the CPC, President of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission), an indication of the importance of this new position and thus of the commission's standing.

First Meeting of the CNSC

The state evening news broadcast *Xinwen Lianbo* reported

that the CNSC held its first meeting on April 15. The report consisted of a voice-over of an account of the meeting, with text of the announcement on the screen rather than any visual images. As they have not been reported in other media, this means that the identities of the participants are unknown. The body of the report was an account of Xi Jinping's speech, which introduced the idea of the “overall national security outlook” (总体国家安全观 *zongti guojia anquan guan*), which would balance domestic and international concerns and address both traditional and non-traditional security concerns. The speech listed the eleven areas of security with which the commission will concern itself: 1) political security (政治安全 *zhengzhi anquan*); 2) homeland security (国土安全 *guotu anquan*); 3) military security (军事安全 *junshi anquan*); 4) economic security (经济安全 *jingji anquan*); 5) cultural security (文化安全 *wenhua anquan*); 6) social security (社会安全 *shehui anquan*); 7) scientific and technological security (科技安全 *keji anquan*); 8) information security (信息安全 *xinxi anquan*); 9) ecological security (生态安全 *shengtai anquan*); 10) resource security (资源安全 *ziyuan anquan*); and 11) nuclear security (核安全 *he anquan*). The eleven areas of security obviously span a wide spectrum from “security” in the traditional sense of national defense and policing to emerging areas of concern such as “cultural security,” indicating that the concept of security is now being thought about in a much broader sense.

Reasons for Establishing the CNSC

Xi Jinping's speech at the first meeting and other commentary in state media indicate that the CNSC is intended as a top-level body for coordinating domestic and foreign se-



curity policy across the various bodies with responsibility for security issues in the Chinese system, i.e. the PLA, the People's Armed Police, the Ministry for Public Security, and the Ministry for State Security, to name only the most important. However, it is clear that the focus at the moment is on the domestic side, and on counter-terrorism operations in Xinjiang in particular.

The first meeting of the CNSC was followed on April 26 by a collective study session of the Politburo on national security issues, which touched on the topic of religious extremism and called for ethnic unity and a tough stance on terrorism. The following day, Xi Jinping left for a four-day visit to Xinjiang which stressed the themes of security (though inspections of PLA and People's Armed Police Units in Kashgar, which he called an "outpost" in fighting terrorism) and ethnic unity (through visits to bilingual schools where children are educated in Uighur and Mandarin and other events involving members of the Uighur community). On the final day of Xi's visit, a suicide bombing was carried out at the South Railway station in Urumqi, killing the two bombers, one bystander, and injuring 79. Xi Jinping called again for "decisive action against violent terrorist attacks" following the incident.

The need for better co-ordination between the multiple agencies dealing with security matters is understood to be one of the major reasons for the forming of the CNSC. For example, following the Kunming Railway Station attack of March 1, Qin Guangrong, the Party Secretary of Yunnan Province, pointed to a failure in intelligence sharing whereby the authorities in Yunnan had not been alerted that a group had reached Honghe in Yunnan that had apparently tried to leave China twice to "wage Jihad," once through Yunnan and once through Guangdong Province.

Another issue in the background to the formation of the CNSC is the ongoing saga regarding former Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang. During the last five years of the Hu Jintao administration, Zhou Yongkang became immensely powerful through his control of the police and intelligence agencies in his capacity as Secretary of the Central Politics and Law Commission. It is now an open secret that Zhou is at the center of a massive investigation for corruption and abuse of power, with large numbers of his relatives and associates having been taken into custody. At the 18th Party Congress in 2012, when Xi Jinping was appointed General Secretary of the Party and a new politburo was appointed, the position of Secretary of

the Central Politics and Law Commission was assigned to Meng Jianzhu (formerly the Minister of Public Security), who was made a member of the Politburo but not of its Standing Committee. It was understood that by not having a member of the Politburo Standing Committee hold the position of Secretary of the Central Politics and Law Commission, the danger of any member of the Politburo Standing Committee—other, obviously, than the Chairman, Xi Jinping—accumulate excessive power would be removed. The establishment of the CNSC is seen as another move to place the entire security apparatus, including those parts of it formerly controlled by Zhou Yongkang, firmly under the control of Xi Jinping.

Future of the CNSC

At present, basic questions about the CNSC remain unanswered, such as whether it will be a body with a fixed number of members who attend all meetings (like the Central Military Commission, which currently has eleven members), or a more flexible arrangement with a core group that is joined by experts on different topics depending on the matter under discussion. It appears that some leading academics may be attached to the commission—Yan Xuetong, the Dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University, is described as an Advanced Research Fellow of the CNSC on his university profile. A question of keen interest to many observers is who will be appointed to head the office that runs the day-to-day affairs of the commission. Various overseas Chinese-language media sources have speculated that this position will be filled by Li Zhanshu, who is a Politburo member and the Head of the General Office of the Party.

A clue to what the membership of the CNSC may look like can be found in the roster of the "Central Small Leading Group on National Security," which was convened on an ad-hoc basis from 2000 (this "small leading group" was in fact identical to the "Central Small Leading Group on Foreign Affairs Work"). This group, which was also chaired by the General Secretary, brought together senior leaders from various branches of the system dealing with security affairs (the PLA, the State Council, the Ministry of Public Security, the Foreign Ministry, the International Liaison Dement, the State Council Information Office, the Ministry of State Security, and several others). The general expectation is that the line-up of the CNSC will look similar—although as a



national-level commission under the Central Committee, its influence will be much greater.

Obviously, the comparison will be made between the CNSC and the U.S. National Security Council. There is likely to be some similarity in their functions in that the CNSC will provide a forum for high-level, long-term strategic thinking about China's foreign affairs with all the relevant players at the table. In its function as a forum for formulating policy on domestic security issues, particularly in times of crisis, it is more likely to resemble the UK's Civil Contingencies Committee, commonly known as COBRA (after Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, where its meetings originally took place), which can be convened to respond to anything from a terrorist attack to an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. At any rate, it seems very probable that the CNSC will play an important role in China's security affairs from this point on.

David Mulrooney is a Research Fellow at ISDP and is based in Beijing.

The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.

© The Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2014.
This Policy Brief can be freely reproduced provided that ISDP is informed.

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

WEBSITE: WWW.ISDP.EU