

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Xi's political vision, China's growing national capabilities, and Beijing's expanding international interests have contributed to the more ambitious foreign policy agenda and greater focus on foreign affairs of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The dramatic shift in US policy toward China from diplomatic engagement to strategic competition during the 2010s created significant challenges for Beijing's economic growth and diplomatic power. In response, Xi has enhanced the institutional power of China's foreign affairs system over the last decade, reflecting the growing importance of great-power competition, the international political economy, and global governance institutions to China's ongoing pursuit of wealth and power. Most notably, in March 2018, Xi upgraded a Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group that had operated since 1981 to a formal commission under the CCP Central Committee, enhancing the bureaucratic weight and political influence of foreign policy in the party-state system.

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Institutions

The **CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC)** is the top party institution dedicated to foreign affairs in the Chinese party-state. The party leadership uses the CFAC to make decisions, assign responsibilities, and oversee implementation of a wide variety of foreign-related policies that include traditional diplomacy but also touch on party-to-party diplomacy, external propaganda, foreign trade, overseas intelligence, domestic counterespionage, and the international dimensions of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan affairs. CFAC meetings are rarely publicized, but the few official readouts that exist show that its membership usually consists of national leaders, including the CCP General Secretary, the Premier, and the Vice President; the Directors of the party's International Liaison Department and Propaganda Department; the Propaganda Department Deputy who serves as Director of the State Council Information Office; the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, National Defense, Public Security, State Security, and Commerce; and the Heads of party and state agencies responsible for Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese.

The administrative agency of the CFAC is the Central Foreign Affairs Office (CFAO), which is classified at the ministerial level but is more influential than its ministerial-level rank suggests because it is led by a deputy national-level leader with a Politburo seat. The CFAO is responsible for executing CFAC decisions; coordinating the implementation of CFAC directives; conducting

research and making suggestions on international affairs and foreign policy management; drafting and overseeing foreign-related laws and regulations; handling foreign-related inquiries from party, state, and local authorities; and organizing central work on maritime rights and interests. Like the CFAC, the CFAO's activities are mostly invisible to those outside the system. Since its founding in 2018, the CFAO has been led by a Politburo member who is the country's top-ranked professional diplomat.

The CFAC's main potential competitor for influence in central decision-making on foreign affairs is the **CCP Central National Security Commission (CNSC)** that Xi announced in November 2013. Previously, the Central Leading Group for Foreign Affairs functioned simultaneously as the Central Leading Group on National Security, which helps explain the somewhat overlapping responsibilities of the CNSC and the CFAC. For Beijing, national security is a concept that encompasses both international and domestic security, and the CNSC plays a role in shaping China's foreign policy. There is limited information available about the operation of the CNSC, but it appears that the CNSC plays a leading role in responding to problems or crises that arise in China's foreign affairs (especially those with a security dimension), while the CFAC focuses on the overall strategy of Chinese foreign policy.

The other major foreign affairs institution is the ministerial-level **CCP International Liaison Department (ILD)**, which handles the party's relationships with foreign political parties and other foreign political organizations. Originally, the ILD focused on the party's relations with foreign communist parties. After the Cold War, however, the number of ruling communist parties dwindled to those in Cambodia, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam. Xi has boosted the ILD's profile significantly since 2017 by launching a series of high-level summits between the CCP and hundreds of foreign political parties. He wants to forge a "new type of political party relationship" that would see more foreign politicians studying and learning from China's governance and modernization. The ILD now claims to maintain relations with more than 600 political parties from over 160 countries.

The highest state institution focused on foreign policy is the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)**. MOFA handles traditional diplomacy and is often at the center of overseas discussions about China's international relations, but it is not the most important institution in Chinese foreign policymaking. Like other State Council ministries under Xi's leadership, MOFA is more of an implementer of policy than a designer of it, especially in an era when "Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy" is the official creed. MOFA has also come under pressure from an increasingly nationalistic Chinese public and polity to assert and defend China's interests abroad more forcefully. In September 2019, following years of hostile US policy toward China, Xi urged China's diplomats to show "fighting spirit" and "dare to struggle." These instructions fed into what became known as "wolf warrior" diplomacy, an assertive and unapologetic approach to defending Beijing's narratives and criticizing foreign opponents.

Since 2018, the Foreign Minister has also served as a State Councilor, an appointment that raises the position from full ministerial rank to deputy national rank, moving from the ranks of the top few hundred leaders to the top few dozen. State Councilors also attend the frequent gatherings of the State Council Executive Meeting, which are chaired by the Premier and include the Vice Premiers,

providing the foreign affairs bureaucracy with a greater voice in government decision-making. This move shifted the Foreign Minister's status closer to its higher standing in the 1990s, when Foreign Minister Qian Qichen served concurrently as a Vice Premier on the Politburo.

The State Council does not have its own coordination body dedicated to foreign affairs, but it does run the **State Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (LGPBRI)**, Xi's signature policy to enhance China's international influence through expanded infrastructure connectivity. The group is likely now led by Executive Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang, who is also a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, but the group's status as embedded in the state—rather than the party—signals that the initiative is only one of many priorities in Xi's foreign policy. The fact that many in the group are internally focused Politburo members shows that domestic interests (such as finding external markets to accommodate overcapacity in state-owned enterprises) are significant drivers of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The broad composition of the CFAC reflects the many government organs whose work touches on foreign affairs. For example, the Ministry of National Defense handles military-to-military diplomacy; the Ministry of State Security handles foreign intelligence (see "Security"); the Ministry of Public Security handles counterespionage and cross-border law enforcement (see "Security"); and the Ministry of Commerce handles foreign trade, foreign investment, and import-export regulations (see "Economy and Trade"). Provincial governments also have foreign affairs offices and can attempt to influence central policy by lobbying Beijing, creating facts on the ground, and distorting or stalling central directives. This is especially so for border and coastal provinces.

The **China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA)** is a deputy ministerial-level agency directly under the State Council that was founded in March 2018 to serve as the country's dedicated foreign aid agency. CIDCA is responsible for foreign aid policy; foreign aid reform; and the planning, negotiation, monitoring, and evaluation of foreign aid projects. The implementation of foreign aid projects remains the responsibility of the various government departments assigned to these tasks. Its operations are supervised by the Foreign Minister in their capacity as a State Councilor.

China's on-the-ground foreign relations are also shaped by various quasi-governmental or nongovernmental actors, especially the state-owned enterprises and private firms that operate overseas infrastructure projects and produce goods and services that are sold to foreign consumers or into international supply chains. A small number of **influential intellectuals** in universities, official research institutes, or even independent think tanks also influence foreign policy through their public scholarship, reports written for the leadership, or even official briefings delivered to the Politburo.

The **CCP United Front Work Department** is a ministerial-level agency under the Central Committee that oversees the party's relations with non-party groups. It manages administrative affairs and political work related to Chinese and Chinese-heritage people abroad following its absorption of the ministerial-level **State Council Overseas Chinese Affairs Office** in March 2018. Various party-state institutions operate United Front organizations designed to foster favorable views toward China among foreign elites, such as the **Chinese People's Institute of Foreign**

Affairs and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. The deputy ministerial-level **International Cooperation Bureau of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and National Supervisory Commission** is responsible for pursuing, apprehending, and recovering assets from former officials abroad who are charged with corruption under programs such as Operation Fox Hunt and Operation Sky Net.

The top policy coordination body on cross-strait relations is the **CCP Central Taiwan Affairs Leading Group (CTALG)**, although Beijing does not consider this part of the foreign affairs system because it sees Taiwan as part of its sovereign territory. The General Secretary chairs the group, reflecting the high importance of Taiwan affairs, but it is notable that since its founding in 1979, the body has not been upgraded to a commission like the CFAC. Other members include the Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) as Deputy Director; the CFAO Director as Secretary-General; a Vice Premier; a Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission; the Directors of the CCP General Office, Propaganda Department, and United Front Work Department; the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Commerce, and State Security; and the Director of the CTALG's administrative agency.

The **State Council Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO)**, the external name of the CCP Central Taiwan Work Office, is a ministerial-level organ that functions as the administrative agency of the CTALG. It is somewhat more outward facing than most such agencies because it also handles mail, transport, and trade links with Taiwan; preparations for meetings with Taiwanese politicians and officials; Taiwan-related propaganda and political influence work; and a wide range of cultural, economic, and scholarly exchanges between the mainland and Taiwan.

People

Xi Jinping (born June 1953) is the key decision maker in Chinese foreign policy. He serves as CFAC director and CNSC chairman, and his top national-level rank endows these institutions with its authority in the Chinese system. The Premier, currently **Li Qiang**, serves as Deputy Director of the CFAC. Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, and Cai Qi serve as Xi's deputies on the CNSC. (See "Top Leadership" for more details.)

Wang Yi (October 1953) is China's top diplomat, serving as both Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Office and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Wang succeeded former CFAO Director **Yang Jiechi** on the party's elite 24-person Politburo at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022. Xi exempted Wang, who turned 69 in 2022, from the norm that leaders aged 68 or older in the year of a Party Congress are ineligible for a Politburo seat, likely because of Xi's trust in Wang's loyalty to his assertive vision for Chinese diplomacy and to a lack of suitably senior potential replacements. Wang is a career diplomat and fluent Japanese speaker who worked as China's Ambassador to Japan and TAO Director before serving as Foreign Minister from 2013 to 2022. Wang was reappointed as minister in July 2023 after his successor Qin Gang had disappeared from public view a month earlier, although this may be a temporary arrangement while the party decides on a more permanent successor to Qin. Wang's great talent has been adapting his diplomatic style to suit the political climate of the times: he pursued a principled but conciliatory line with Japan during his ambassadorship but proved fully capable of aggressive rhetoric to match the mood of the wolf

warriors. Wang's deputy ministerial-level deputies in the CFAO are **Deng Hongbo** (July 1965), a career diplomat specializing in US affairs who is a protégé of Yang Jiechi, and **Sun Shuxian** (January 1966), a maritime expert and former Deputy in the old State Oceanic Administration.

Qin Gang (March 1966) is a State Councilor who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs from December 2022 until July 2023. Qin was selected to the CCP Central Committee for the first time at the 20th Party Congress and promoted from Chinese Ambassador to the United States to Foreign Minister at age 56 in December 2022, making one of the youngest-ever officeholders. He was appointed as a State Councilor in March 2023. This sequence of events saw Qin complete a dizzying ascent from the deputy ministerial to the deputy national level, moving from the top few thousand party officials to the top few dozen in just six months. Qin leapfrogged several veteran deputy ministerial-level diplomats to become minister. His rise was best explained by the relationship that he built with Xi when he worked closely with the paramount leader on foreign visits as MOFA's protocol chief from 2014 to 2017, although he may have alienated other senior diplomats in the process. Qin disappeared from public view on June 25, 2023, and was removed as foreign minister July 25, 2023. Beijing offered no information about his whereabouts, his physical condition, or his political standing, fueling speculation that he either suffered a serious health incident or became the subject of a party discipline investigation.

Qin also represented a new crop of European experts in the top ranks of MOFA, having done three tours in the United Kingdom and two stints in the MOFA Western Europe Department. Other senior diplomats with significant European experience include Executive Deputy Minister Ma Zhaoxu, Deputy Minister Deng Li, Assistant Ministers Hua Chunying and Xu Feihong, ILD Director Liu Jianchao, and top CNSC bureaucrat Liu Haixing. This trend aligns with Beijing's increasing fatalism about US-China relations and shift in strategy toward Europe as a key battleground for international diplomatic, economic, and technological competition.

Qi Yu (April 1961) is the Party Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unlike in other ministries, it is common for the CCP to appoint someone apart from the minister to serve as party secretary, likely because the minister's busy travel schedule would make it difficult to supervise party affairs at home. However, Qi's appointment was unprecedented in that he is a veteran of the party's Organization Department who had no foreign policy experience, a clear sign that Xi wanted to exercise closer central control over diplomatic personnel and tie promotions to advancing his own vision.

Liu Jianchao (February 1964) is the Director of the CCP International Liaison Department. Liu is a professional diplomat whose career at MOFA overlapped considerably with that of Qin Gang—they worked together both as MOFA spokespersons in the 2000s and in the Chinese mission to the United Kingdom in the 1990s. This shared background could help foster closer integration of the ILD's party-to-party diplomacy with MOFA's state-to-state diplomacy. Liu, who studied international relations at Oxford University, previously served as China's Ambassador to the Philippines and then to Indonesia, and most recently as a full-time Deputy Director under Yang Jiechi in the CFAO.

Song Tao (April 1955) is the Director of the Taiwan Affairs Office. Song served as ILD Director from 2015 to 2022 before he was reassigned to a CPPCC committee, a move that usually indicates imminent retirement (Song was past the retirement age of 65 for ministerial-level officials), but he was unexpectedly reassigned to lead the TAO after the 20th Party Congress (despite not being on the new Central Committee). Song worked in Fujian during the 1980s and 1990s (while Xi was rising through the ranks there) before moving into the foreign affairs system and rising to become Ambassador to Guyana, Ambassador to the Philippines, MOFA Deputy Minister, and then CFAO Deputy Director. His relative inexperience in Taiwan affairs suggests that Xi and higher-level leaders will continue to dominate policymaking.

Ding Xuexiang (September 1962) is the Executive Vice Premier and seventh-ranked member of the Politburo Standing Committee. He is likely to take over from his predecessor Han Zheng, who became Vice President in March 2023, as Director of the State Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative and oversees the climate diplomacy portfolio on the State Council (see “Energy and Environment”). Therefore, he plays a prominent role in two prominent aspects of China’s external affairs, although his likely personal impact on the roles remains something of an unknown quantity. Ding is a top Xi ally who was a senior aide for most of Xi’s leadership, but he lacks significant experience in national or even provincial leadership roles.

Liu Haixing (April 1963) is the ministerial-level Executive Deputy Director of the CNSC General Office. He is a key bureaucratic powerbroker in national security policymaking at home and abroad. Previously, he was a career diplomat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) from 1985 until 2017, where he specialized in French and European affairs, including a stint as a Minister in the Chinese Embassy in France from 2009 to 2012. He left MOFA as an Assistant Foreign Minister, becoming a Deputy Director of the CNSC General Office in March 2017 before winning promotion to ministerial rank in July 2022. Liu, like Xi, is the “princeling” son of a senior official, which may explain how he came to win Xi’s trust to hold this especially sensitive position. His father, Liu Shuqing, was a senior diplomat who served as a Deputy Foreign Minister from 1984 to 1989 and then as Secretary-General of the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group and Director of the State Council Foreign Affairs Office from 1989 to 1991.

Lü Luhua (1970) is a career diplomat who has served as Xi’s top personal political secretary focused on handling his day-to-day work related to foreign affairs since at least 2014. His administrative home is the deputy ministerial-level Office of the President of the People’s Republic of China, which is thought to overlap with the Office of the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, under the CCP General Office. Information on his exact responsibilities and career history is scarce but he is thought to enjoy deputy ministerial-level rank, although he could be only a departmental-level leader. He joined MOFA in 1996 and worked mostly in the Policy Research Department and the Policy Planning Department, with overseas postings to Kenya and to the European Union in the years before Xi took office in 2012.

Policy

Xi has changed the basic orientation of Chinese foreign policy from the reticent “hide and bide” approach introduced by Deng Xiaoping after the international Tiananmen backlash to a new

paradigm of “striving for achievement” through “great-power diplomacy” and a “community of common destiny.” While Beijing began to pursue a more ambitious and assertive foreign policy under his predecessor, Hu Jintao, Xi’s personal leadership has accelerated and intensified these trends beyond what might have been expected amid the structural phenomenon of China’s rising power. Significant political milestones in Xi’s foreign policy include a first-ever Neighborhood Diplomacy Work Symposium in October 2013, which coincided with the launch of the BRI; a Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in November 2014, which established national rejuvenation as the central theme of Chinese foreign policy; and another Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in June 2018, which determined that China should actively participate in leading reform of the global governance system.

In his authoritative report to the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, Xi said that the party’s “central task” is to “build a socialist modern power” by the centenary of the People’s Republic of China in 2049 and to “use Chinese-style modernization to comprehensively advance the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Linking “Chinese-style modernization,” a concept implying the applicability of aspects of China’s socio-economic model in other countries, to national rejuvenation is new and emphasizes Xi’s determination to steer China along a non-Western development course; it also offers an alternative development framework that prioritizes economic growth over democratic governance and individual rights. Xi’s report clarified that his vision for national rejuvenation means transforming China into a country that “leads the world in comprehensive national power and international influence.” This vision will likely intensify US-China strategic competition.

The report maintained Xi’s focus on a “new type of international relations” based on peaceful coexistence, non-interference, and economic globalization. It criticizes “protectionism,” “decoupling,” and “unilateral sanctions”—implicit yet clear criticism of US policy that Xi made explicit at the Two Sessions in March 2023 when he said, “Western countries, led by the United States, have implemented comprehensive containment, encirclement, and suppression against China, bringing unprecedentedly severe challenges for China’s development.” Xi is trying to leverage the economic fallout of US-led sanctions and export controls to mobilize developing countries to pursue a more multipolar world that dilutes the influence of advanced industrial democracies. The report advocated China’s “correct” model of globalization, which focuses on prioritizing international trade, investment, and cooperation over concerns about domestic governance and individual rights.

Beijing will deepen its engagement in international affairs, wielding its growing influence both bilaterally and in international forums, where it will actively seek to “safeguard” the elements of the international order that it perceives China benefits from while trying to reshape global governance in a more China-friendly direction. This effort includes new and contentious efforts to “actively participate” in global human rights governance and setting global security rules. Xi is also rallying the developing world to support Chinese objectives through his advocacy of a Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative. However, Xi softened the CCP’s focus on the BRI from “pursuing the [BRI] as a priority” to “promoting the high-quality development of the [BRI]” in 2022, reflecting an evolution in the project’s development from an initial quantitative push to a qualitative refinement that addresses earlier problems and setbacks. This suggests that

Beijing will remain cautious about expanded development diplomacy, which has proven costly and problematic, and focus more on building influence through norms-based initiatives and China's own economic strength.

Xi's report suggests that assertive diplomacy will persist, with its emphasis on "struggle" and defending China's interests related to political control of sensitive areas like Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang and related to territorial disputes in places such as the South China Sea and the China-India border. Earlier, the party's third "history resolution," which Xi issued in November 2021, stated that China "must not be misguided or intimidated" by foreign opposition, as "constant concessions can only lead to bullying that wins an inch then wants a foot, and making compromises to achieve one's aim can only lead to more humiliating circumstances." China still sees value in maintaining good relations with the United States and Europe but does not want to do so at the expense of its autonomy, such as maintaining good relations with Russia.

Beijing still sees the international balance of power as undergoing a "profound adjustment" in China's favor, but it recognizes the increasing threat to China's trajectory posed by domestic economic issues and US-led efforts to curtail its economic and technological rise. The party previously saw China in a "period of strategic opportunity" in which favorable domestic and international environments enabled the country to focus on pursuing economic development. But that period of strategic opportunity is now over. Xi's report argued that China has entered a period in which "strategic opportunity co-exists with risks and challenges, and uncertain and unpredictable factors are increasing," wherein "all sorts of 'black swan' and 'gray rhino' events could occur at any time." Xi warned that the party must prepare for "high winds, heavy seas, and even terrifying storms" by strengthening party leadership, focusing on people-centered development, deepening structural reforms, and developing a spirit of struggle. This framing shows Xi's determination to simultaneously resist Western pressure and leverage foreign threats to bolster his domestic agenda.

Foreign affairs are likely to become more important for China in the future as geopolitical competition with the United States and its allies continues to intensify. Moreover, now that Xi has virtually secured total power domestically, he is stepping out to become a global dealmaker, such as in the Iran-Saudi rapprochement and potentially in the Russia-Ukraine conflict resolution, enhancing China's diplomatic power to accord with its status in international economic and strategic affairs more closely.

Regarding Taiwan, while Xi maintains the party's long-standing commitment to prioritizing "peaceful unification," he has ratcheted up assertiveness about its territorial claim to the territory, although he has not come close to invading or otherwise using force to achieve unification. While Hu Jintao told the 18th Party Congress in November 2012 that "achieving peaceful unification begins with ensuring the peaceful development of cross-Straits relations," Xi used his report to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 to declare that "complete unification of the motherland" is an "inevitable requirement" for achieving China's national rejuvenation as a great power by 2049. He rattled cross-Straits tensions when he repeated this assertion in a tubthumping speech in January 2019 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the "Letter to Taiwan Compatriots" that kickstarted Beijing's post-Mao unification efforts. Xi also reaffirmed the Anti-Secession Law of 2005 by saying

that “we do not promise to renounce the use of force” against so-called “Taiwan independence activists” and “interference by foreign forces.”

During Xi’s second term, Beijing also began to send People’s Liberation Army airplanes, drones, and warships on regular exercises in Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone and Exclusive Economic Zone. This included major exercises involving missile tests and exclusion zones on all sides of Taiwan following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit in August 2022, after which Beijing began to routinely cross the Taiwan Strait median line, which previously had been treated as a strategic buffer. China’s Ministry of Defense has framed these exercises as efforts to deter the United States and its allies from upgrading their economic, military, and political ties with Taiwan, although they certainly also help improve China’s military readiness. At the 20th Party Congress, Xi said for the first time that “resolving the Taiwan issue is a matter for the Chinese themselves to decide,” highlighting his concern that outsiders are shifting the cross-Strait status quo farther away from what Beijing wants.