

**THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION**  
**CENTER FOR NORTHEAST ASIAN POLICY STUDIES**

**CHINESE NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION-MAKING:  
PROCESSES AND CHALLENGES**

Yun Sun  
CNAPS Visiting Fellow, China, Autumn 2011

May 2013

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington D.C. 20036-2188  
Tel: (202)797-6000 Fax: (202)797-2485  
<http://www.brookings.edu>

## One. Overview

In studies of contemporary China, information about the national security decision-making process is largely absent, despite the abundance of information and analysis on leadership politics and domestic policy-making. A proliferation of foreign policy actors in China has attracted much attention from researchers, leading to a booming number of investigations into the governmental and non-governmental players involved. The processes themselves—in which these players operate and interact to produce the eventual policy decisions—have eluded academic scrutiny, mostly due to the scarcity of available information. The topic, however, is critically important in achieving an accurate understanding of China’s national security policies which often seem unclear and plagued by conflicting messages.

In the Chinese context, the definition of “national security” is significantly different from that in the United States. For the American policy community, the term “national security” usually refers to the country’s external national security interests and threats. The responsibility for coordinating national security affairs lies primarily with the National Security Council. In China’s case, the term “national security” encompasses both domestic/internal and foreign/external security and, therefore, has a much broader connotation. This paper is primarily focused on the external dimensions of China’s national security. There are many overlapping aspects between China’s national security policy and its foreign policy, as the latter also serves to protect China’s national security interests. However, because national security also covers military security, national defense, economic security and other non-traditional security challenges, the framework and coverage is broader than with foreign policy.

This paper examines three processes of China’s national security decision-making: the decision-making at the top level, the policy-coordination process conducted through the National Security Leading Small Group (NSLSG), and the informational process for national security decision-making. Generally speaking, the supreme decision-making authority in China is monopolized and exercised through the collective leadership of the Politburo Standing Committee; this is especially true with regard to “strategically important” issues, such as Sino-U.S. relations. However, the paramount leader at the time of this writing, President Hu Jintao (the Politburo’s designated person for national security affairs) commanded large authority and privilege in determining regular national security policies. His primary advisor on national security (at the time of this writing State Councilor Dai Bingguo) played a central role in informing and advising him on key policy decisions. As the Director of the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (the same organization as NSLSG),<sup>1</sup> Dai also carried responsibility for inter-agency policy consultation and coordination through the NSLSG/FALSG. Information for national security decision-making is produced primarily by participating agencies and think tanks, but there is a standard process of screening, organizing, and disseminating that allows information to flow to the top.

---

<sup>1</sup> The general understanding of the relationship between FALSG and NSLSG in China is that it is literally the same organization with two different titles (一个机构两块牌子). However, several government analysts pointed out that within the same organization there is a distribution of labor on national security and foreign policy between two different bureaus.

A fundamental challenge for China's national security decision-making system lies in the conflict between the need for centralization and the diffusion of power (collective leadership) at the top level. Decisions on strategically important issues must be based on consensus, which is created through time-consuming debates; consensus-building proves especially problematic when a timely response is required. As an informal and ad-hoc committee, the NSLSG does not operate as the core national security team designated to follow, analyze, and coordinate daily national security affairs, nor does it have the adequate human resources and professional capacity to play that role. In reality, its role is more or less confined to the organizer of research and coordinator of policies. Its authority on national security affairs is further undermined by unbalanced civil-military relations and the lack of civilian oversight over daily military operational activities. In the informational processes, the players in the Chinese system are extremely risk-averse. Confined by agency perspectives and career advancement interests, they are reluctant to report new findings that are not in line with established conventional wisdom.

Understanding that most of the challenges in the Chinese national security system have deep historical, political and structural roots, any attempt to address them must be bold and might seem politically unrealistic. Nevertheless, the recommendations offered in this paper are aimed at addressing the fundamental deficiencies of the current system. Their feasibility depends on the future of political reform, which although widely agreed as inevitable, has thus far been successfully avoided.

## **Two. Chinese National Security Decision-Making System: Structure and Processes**

### **A. The Historical Context**

During the first and the second generations of Chinese leadership after 1949, Chinese national security decision-making was largely characterized by the unparalleled authority of the paramount leader: Mao Zedong (1949-1976) and Deng Xiaoping (1978-1992). Especially during Mao's era, key national security decisions such as China's decisions to enter the Korean War and to export revolution to third world countries were decided by the top leader alone.<sup>2</sup> The absolute authority of the top leader produced speedy decisions on difficult national security matters with little internal dispute.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it also produced disastrous policies with tragic results, as attested by the experience of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> On Mao's decision to enter the Korean War, see: Sima Liang (司马亮), "The Decision-making on China Entering the Korean War," 《中国出兵援朝始末》, [History Reference], people.com.cn, August 02, 2010.

On Mao's theory on "Three Worlds" and the export of revolution, please see: Wang Lixin (王立新), "Mao Zedong's Views of the Times and the Establishment of the International and Foreign Policy Principles of the New China,"

《毛泽东的时代观与新中国国际和外交方针的确立》, Shandong Provincial School of the Chinese Communist Party, <http://www.sddx.gov.cn/001/001013/001013001/903561435594.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with retired Chinese diplomats, October 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Wang Xiaodong, (王晓东), "A Study of the National Security Leadership System," 《国家安全领导体制研究》, Current Affairs Publishing, 2009, pp 234-235.

Consequently, the leadership structure was reformed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1978. The principle of “collective leadership” was reinforced and, as of today, still forms the foundation for the Chinese Communist Party’s decision-making.<sup>5</sup> For the decision-making process, “collective leadership” was designed to replace the one-man show with a group of senior leaders jointly making decisions under the principle of “democratic centralism.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout Deng Xiaoping’s era, however, key national security decisions were still a privilege reserved for the paramount leader. Decisions on adopting “one country, two systems” for the Hong Kong issue and on “shelving the disputes while seeking joint development” over the maritime disputes in the East China and South China Seas were made primarily by Deng alone.<sup>7</sup>

The third and fourth generations of Chinese top leaders, Jiang Zemin (1993-2002) and Hu Jintao (2003-2012), held far less absolute authority in national security decision-making compared with their predecessors. Chinese leaders after Deng no longer possess the revolutionary legitimacy, prestige, and leadership credentials Mao and Deng enjoyed. In addition, their control of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has oftentimes been questioned by outside observers.<sup>8</sup> As a result, their power and authority increasingly have been subject to the balance of power among various factions within the Party and the government.<sup>9</sup> (Their roles and authority in national security decision-making will be discussed in the following section.)

## **B. The Decision-Making Processes**

Strictly speaking, the authority of national security decision-making in China is distributed and exercised among several government establishments, such as the National People’s Congress, the President, State Council, and the Central Military Commission.<sup>10</sup> That said, the Communist Party

---

<sup>5</sup> Deng Xiaoping, “The Reform of the Leadership Systems of the Party and the State,” 《党和国家领导制度的改革》, August 18, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> Party Congress further limited the paramount leader’s authority by abolishing the “Party Chairman”, a position that implies top, unparalleled, and absolute authority. Its replacement, the position of “General Secretary”, is designed to be a leading member of the PB/PBSC who convenes meetings for collective decision-making and reports to PB/PBSC. Wang Xiaodong, (王晓东), “A Study of the National Security Leadership System,” 《国家安全领导体制研究》, Current Affairs Publishing, 2009, p 238.

<sup>7</sup> Pan Guang (潘光), “Deng Xiaoping’s Strategic Thinking on Resolving Disputes in Chinese Periphery,” 《邓小平解决周边争端的战略思维》, [Jie Fang Daily], December 09, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Although some analysts question whether the Party has the capacity to control the PLA, most Chinese and American analysts agree that the PLA does not operate fundamentally outside of the Party’s control. On matters where the Party does not have a specific guideline, the PLA enjoys operational freedom, sometimes leading to certain conflicts. However, the issue here is not the Party’s capacity to control PLA, but the mechanism for detailed oversight.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with an expert on Chinese politics, Washington DC, September 2011.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the National People’s Congress has the supreme legislative and decision-making authorities by virtue of its power to approve the appointments of senior leaders, its control over the national-security budget, its legislative power, and the power to declare war. The President enjoys executive authority over personnel appointment, considerable decision-making power on non-critical and operational national security issues, and certain power over the processes. The State Council (cabinet) and the Central Military Commission are key implementers of national security decisions. Their operational expertise and informational advantage also warrants their participation in the decision-making process, although not as the key decision-makers. Wang Xiaodong, (王晓

plays the central leadership role in China's national security affairs. Depending on the significance of the issue, the decision-making authority could either reside with the paramount leader or require broader participation and approval from the Politburo Standing Committee, Politburo, or even the Central Committee.

i. The Party Apparatus

Within the Chinese Communist Party, the bureaucratic ranking and decision-making authority increases from the Central Committee to the Politburo (PB), then to the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). Every five years, a Party Congress elects the Central Committee, supposedly the decision-making body within the Party with the broadest representation.<sup>11</sup> Its 204 members (and 167 alternate members) convene at least once a year, at the annual plenary meeting of the Party, making the Central Committee unsuitable for daily management of national security affairs. The PB, made up of twenty-five representatives elected by the Central Committee, meets routinely only once a month, as five members are not Beijing-based and other members constantly engage in domestic and international travel.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, due to seniority and operational necessity, the national-security decision-making authority is ultimately concentrated in the PBSC, which is bureaucratically more senior than the PB and has all nine members based in Beijing.<sup>13</sup> The PBSC meets at least once weekly.<sup>14</sup> If an emergency occurs, a special meeting may be held. These meetings usually are organized by the coordinating agency, the Foreign Affairs Office of the Central Committee (FAO).<sup>15</sup>

Within the PBSC, each member has designated responsibility for a specific policy area, such as foreign policy/military affairs, the government and economic affairs, among others.<sup>16</sup>

---

东), "A Study of the National Security Leadership System", 《国家安全领导体制研究》, Current Affairs Publishing, 2009, pp 247-250.

The Central Military Commission is in fact one organization with two titles: the Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China as a government establishment, and the Central Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China as a Party establishment. It is the supreme military decision-making and command organization of China, leading the Chinese armed forces including the People's Liberation Army, Armed Police and People's Militia.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with an expert on the Chinese political system, Washington DC, September, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> In 2011 for example, PB members Wang Yang, Bo Xilai, Zhang Gaoli, and Yu Zhengsheng were party secretaries of Guangdong, Chongqing, Tianjin, and Shanghai, respectively. Richard Bush, "The Perils of Proximity: China-Japan Security Relations," Brookings, 2011, p125.

<sup>13</sup> The members of the PBSC include the leaders of all the top political establishments of the regime: the president (also the general secretary of the Party), National People's Congress, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, State Council, the Party's Propaganda Department, Discipline Inspection Commission and the Commission of Politics and Law, and two successors for the "next generation of leaders."

<sup>14</sup> Richard Bush, "The Perils of Proximity: China-Japan Security Relations," Brookings, 2011, p125.

<sup>15</sup> Zhou Qi, "Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s", PhD Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, March 2008, p. 44. The Foreign Affairs Office of the CPC Central Committee is also known as the Office of the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group of the CPC Central Committee. The National Security Leading Small Group and the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group have the same member composition and share staff.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part Three: The Role of the Military in Foreign Policy," China Leadership Monitor 36. 2011. P3.

The paramount leader himself is designated to lead on foreign/military affairs, which gives him an unparalleled position in determining the country's national security policies.<sup>17</sup>

However, it should be noted that these bestowed authorities are anything but absolute: generally speaking, the more important the issue, the broader the discussion. No leader today wishes to carry sole responsibility for a major, critical policy decision in case the decision fails and backfires, jeopardizing his own career and, in a worst case scenario, the legitimacy of the whole system.<sup>18</sup> On key or "strategically important" national security affairs, the natural instinct of Chinese leaders is to hold discussions as broadly as needed and to make decisions through consensus-building. This is partly aimed at maximizing inputs into the decision-making process in order to take into consideration the views of all players. At the same time, it also serves to legitimize the final decision through rallying broad support.

The scope of discussion and consensus-building largely depends on the nature and significance of the issue at hand. A senior Chinese analyst commented: "Usually, daily routine national security affairs are decided by the paramount leader, but emergency matters need to be discussed and decided by the PBSC. Important issues, such as the introduction of new key policies, will have to be discussed and decided by the PB. Significant issues, such as the changes to the existing guidelines and principles, will be decided (or at least voted on) at the Central Committee."<sup>19</sup> Another more popular, but simplified, categorization divides national security affairs into routine issues and strategic issues, which fall respectively under the authority of the paramount leader and the PBSC. The roles of the PB and Central Committee in policy decisions are negligible; because in reality they rarely challenge a consensus already reached by the PBSC.<sup>20</sup>

## ii. Decision-Making by the Paramount Leader

Although the paramount leader is consistently portrayed as "first among equals" of the nine-member PBSC, it would be wrong to assume that he does not command more authority than the rest. Especially on national security affairs, as the designated "person in charge" among a group of practically domestic generalists,<sup>21</sup> the paramount leader occupies a unique position in the decision-making process. Although strategic issues, such as relations with key powers like the United States and Japan, will be brought to the PBSC for discussion and collective decision-making, routine and daily national security matters are primarily the responsibility of the paramount leader.<sup>22</sup> For example, the paramount leader has the authority to issue "instructions" to require all line agencies to enhance information gathering or sharing on a certain issue. His authority is much greater than people might observe through the lens of the PBSC or PB.

---

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, October 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, October 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a Chinese analyst, October 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>21</sup> As of 2011, none of the nine members of the Politburo comes from a foreign policy background. They all rose to the current status from a domestic political track.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, Beijing, November 2011.

In this decision-making process, the paramount leader is assisted by his national security advisor, who at the time of this writing was State Councilor Dai Bingguo, and Dai's staff at the Central Committee FAO.<sup>23</sup> When a national security issue arises, the process begins with the FAO, which summons research reports and analyses from relevant government agencies and key policy think tanks. The turnaround period is usually rather short, ranging from two days to one week. In some cases, the FAO will also organize policy discussions<sup>24</sup> or invite policy experts to deliver oral briefings to the State Councilor, who draws conclusions and forms policy advice through this process.<sup>25</sup> The FAO will summarize the key findings for the State Councilor to present to the paramount leader. It is also the FAO's responsibility to determine whether to call a NSLSG meeting in order to incorporate input and policy preferences from all agencies involved in national security affairs.<sup>26</sup> (See the following section.)

It is apparent that the State Councilor and FAO occupy a central position in advising the paramount leader on routine national security issues. In fact, they also ease the burden of the paramount leader by deciding less important, procedural, and operational issues that do not need to reach the top level. This authority is a derivative of the authority of the paramount leader over national security affairs. As a senior Chinese official described the process in late 2011, "most of the procedural (national security) issues are taken care of within the ministries. For those that reach State Councilor level, he and the FAO have a large authority to make decisions. Only those that Dai could not decide with certainty will be brought to Hu Jintao. And only those that Hu could not decide alone will be pushed to PBSC."<sup>27</sup>

### iii. Decision-Making by the PBSC

As discussed above, in reality, the principle of collective leadership in national security affairs is confined to "strategic issues"—usually issues for which the paramount leader lacks full confidence in making an independent call. Perhaps the most prominent example of this was when then-paramount leader Jiang Zemin convened two expanded meetings of the PBSC to decide whether China should change its policy toward the United States as a result of the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade.<sup>28</sup> Participation in the expanded meetings was extended beyond the members of PBSC to include representatives of related government ministries, Party departments, and some retired senior officials.<sup>29</sup> This expanded participation

---

<sup>23</sup> It is observed that in recent years, the General Office of the Central Committee is assuming a rising role in organizing policy discussions among experts. Interview with a Chinese analyst, November 2011.

<sup>24</sup> It is said that the FAO routinely hosts a group of experts on the first Tuesday of each month to discuss various cutting-edge national security issues and foreign affairs. Other ad hoc meetings are organized as situations arise.

<sup>25</sup> Most of the participants of these meetings are specialists from within government agencies, sometimes accompanied by their supervisors. Outside experts, such as those from think tanks, are a minority on the invitee list. Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>26</sup> However, it is observed that FAO is not the only office with the authority to organize such meetings. The General Office of the Central Committee and the senior leaders also carry such a role depending on the issues.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with a Chinese official, November 2011.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed review of the process, see section on "Policy-making during the Belgrade Bombing Crisis," in Zhou Qi, "Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy Since the Early 1990s," PhD dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, March 2008, pp. 345-364.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

reflected the leader's desire to hold the broadest possible discussion of the crisis and to formulate a widely acceptable decision based on consensus.

Another example in which PBSC consensus was required was the September 2006 decision on a proposed visit by then-new Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo without a firm commitment from Abe that he would not visit Yasukuni Shrine.<sup>30</sup> When then-Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo visited Tokyo on September 23, 2006, Japanese vice Foreign Minister Shotaro Yachi strongly proposed that China be the first country Prime Minister Abe Shinzo visit after his inauguration on September 26. However, the two sides couldn't reach an agreement over whether Abe would offer a promise not to visit Yasukuni Shrine during his term. On September 26, Dai returned to Beijing without an explicit commitment from Tokyo, and the PBSC convened emergency meetings that same evening and again on September 27 to discuss whether China should receive Abe. In the end, a positive decision was reached, and Dai returned to Tokyo on September 28 to personally deliver the message.

This decision model was best summarized by then-President Jiang Zemin at the 16th Party Congress in 1999 as "collective leadership, democratic centralism, individual preparation, and decisions made at meetings" (集体领导, 民主集中, 个别酝酿, 会议决定).<sup>31</sup> These principles determine that 1) Significant issues must be discussed among all members at each level and shall not be determined by the minority; 2) Information should be prepared and distributed and opinions exchanged prior to the meetings; and 3) Decisions must be reached only at formal meetings and approved by the majority of all participants.<sup>32</sup>

Through this process, the State Councilor and FAO still carry the primary responsibility for preparing policy briefings and distributing them to the offices of PBSC members prior to formal discussions. Assisted by the State Councilor, the paramount leader chairs the session in which the pros and cons of each policy option is argued. According to leaked diplomatic cables from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, in most cases, issues are not decided by vote but are considered and discussed for as long as it takes to arrive at a consensus.<sup>33</sup> In certain, extreme cases when consensus cannot be reached, voting becomes necessary. For example, after the second North Korean nuclear test in 2009 led to a fierce debate on whether China should amend its long-time support of Pyongyang, the PBSC cast a vote. Six members voted against a policy change.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> "Dai Bingguo's Secret Visit to Japan Nailed Down Abe's Visit to China," [戴秉国秘访日本敲定安倍访华], China Review News, October 5, 2006; <http://www.zhgnpl.com/doc/1002/2/3/0/100223004.html?coluid=0&kindid=0&docid=100223004>. And interview, Beijing, November 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Jiang Zemin, "Speech at the Symposium to Celebrate the 78<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese Communist Party," 《江泽民在纪念中国共产党成立 78 周年座谈会上的讲话》, June 28, 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Zhang Deyou, Li Tao (张德友, 李涛), "Reflection on the Construction of the Leadership Responsibility System," 《关于领导责任制度建设的思考》, [ZhengZhiXueYanJiu], (Political Science Studies), Issue 4, 2009, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> "True Democracy Within China's Politburo?" *Der Spiegel*, December 5, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Interview conducted by the author while at International Crisis Group, Washington, DC, September 2009.

Although strategic national security decisions are collectively made by the PBSC through discussions and consensus-building, the paramount leader still “carries the greatest weight” in the decision-making process.<sup>35</sup> Part of the reason is that the paramount leader: 1) is literally the head of the party, military, and government hierarchies; 2) is the official “person in charge” on national security affairs; and 3) is seen as *the* top leader inside and outside the political system. This special status determines that other PBSC members must respect his policy preferences and give them special consideration (sometimes in exchange for the paramount leader’s support of their preferences on issues under their purview).<sup>36</sup> At the same time, on national security issues in which these domestic generalists do not have a special interest, deference to the paramount leader is simply politically expedient.<sup>37</sup> Either way, the decisions will be adopted as the result of collective decision-making and disseminated as “red header documents” of the PBSC, serving to reinforce its authoritativeness.

### **Three. Coordination and Consultation in the National Security Decision-Making Process**

Despite wide speculation to the contrary, at the PBSC level there is very little private coordination or consultation on national security issues. In China’s elite political realm, personal relations are seen as extremely sensitive. Regardless of its purpose or topic, any private meeting between members of the PBSC would trigger suspicion and speculation.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, private meetings among personal staff members are also taboo since staff are viewed as messengers and stand-ins for their superiors. Although private bargaining and personal exchanges over key national security matters are extremely rare, it can be argued that coordination exists at the top level in the form of PBSC consensus-building through in-depth discussions.

In the more professional realm of national security policy-making, the institution set up by the Central Committee to serve the top leadership, the National Security Leading Small Group (NSLSG), comprises key government and party agency players in the national security process. For several decades, the Chinese leadership has used informal bodies called “leading small groups” to advise the PB on policy and to coordinate implementation of policy decisions.<sup>39</sup> Among the eight primary leading small groups led by members of PBSC,<sup>40</sup> the NSLSG was created most recently, in 2000, as an informal institution that theoretically performs a wide range of roles including coordination, communication, consultation, supervision, and decision-

---

<sup>35</sup> “True Democracy Within China’s Politburo?” *Der Spiegel*, December 5, 2010. And interviews with Chinese analysts, October and November 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Interviews with China experts, Washington DC, September 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Alice Miller, “The CCP Central Committee’s Leading Small Groups,” *China Leadership Monitor*, Hoover Institution, No. 26. September, 2008. p1.

<sup>40</sup> As of late 2011, the other seven LSGs (and their leaders) were Finance & Economy (led by Wen Jiabao), Politics and Law (Zhou Yongkang), Foreign Affairs (Hu Jintao), Hong Kong & Macao (Xi Jinping), Taiwan Affairs (Hu Jintao), Propaganda & Ideology (Li Changchun), and Party-Building (Xi Jinping). *Ibid.* p. 6.

making.<sup>41</sup> It reduces the decision-making burden for senior leaders and adds an effective layer of coordination and arbitration into the system.<sup>42</sup>

Allegedly, the establishment of the NSLSG in 2000 was in response to China's failure to produce a timely, well-coordinated reaction after the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade.<sup>43</sup> Headed by paramount leader Hu Jintao (the PBSC-designated "person in charge" on national security affairs), NSLSG and the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG) share the same executive office: the Foreign Affairs Office of the Central Committee (FAO), managed at the time of this writing by State Councilor Dai Bingguo.<sup>44</sup> NSLSG, FALSG and the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group each have a distinct portfolio: national security, foreign policy and Taiwan affairs. The membership of the NSLSG encompasses all agencies involved in foreign policy and national security arenas, which in 2011 included<sup>45</sup>:

- Eight State Council ministries: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Yang Jiechi and Zhang Zhijun<sup>46</sup>), Ministry of Public Security (Meng Jianzhu), Ministry of State Security (Geng Huichang), Ministry of Commerce (Chen Deming), Office of Taiwan Affairs (Wang Yi), Office of Hong Kong and Macao Affairs (Wang Guangya), Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs (Li Haifeng), Information Office (Wang Chen)
- Two Party organs: Department of Propaganda (Liu Yunshan), International Department (Wang Jiarui)
- Two military representatives: Ministry of Defense (Liang Guanglie), General Staff Department (Deputy Chief of Staff Ma Xiaotian)

---

<sup>41</sup> Lu Ning, "The Dynamics of Foreign Policy Decision-making in China," 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Westview Press, 1997, p11.

<sup>42</sup> Zhou Qi, "Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s," PhD Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, March 2008, p. 123.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 147. There have also been abundant arguments that the establishment of the NSLSG in 2000 originated from then-President Jiang Zemin's desire to build a platform to continue to exercise his influence after his retirement in 2002. His initial effort to establish a Chinese "National Security Council" was opposed by certain senior civilian and military leaders, which resulted in the establishment of the NSLSG as a compromise. Interviews, Washington DC, January, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Dai's two deputies at the FAO in 2011 were Qiu Yuanping, former Deputy Secretary General of the International Department, and Ye Dabo, former Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar. "FAO Hosted Revolutionary Song Concert to Celebrate the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Founding of Chinese Communist Party," 《中央外办举办红歌会喜迎中国共产党成立 90 周年》, [ZhongZhiDangJianWang] (The website of the Party Building for the CCP Central Committee Institutions), July 10, 2011, <http://www.zzdjw.com/GB/179001/218367/15122415.html>. In the mid 2000's, the FAO recruited Chen Xiaogong, the former Chinese defense attaché of the Chinese embassy in Washington DC to be the third deputy director to "support" the newly created NSLSG. After leaving FAO, Chen was appointed to head the General Staff Department's Second Department. And the third deputy director's position at FAO has been left open. James Mulvenon, "Chen Xiaogong: A Political Biography," China Leadership Monitor, No. 22, 2007. And interviews, Washington DC, January 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Interviews, October and November 2011. And "Members of the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (2010)," 《现任中央外事工作领导小组领导成员名单 (2010 年)》, [ZhongGuoDaWuWang] ("Understanding China": A website on Chinese leaders), March 24, 2010, <http://www.huayingya.com.cn/html/gonggao/21874.html>.

<sup>46</sup> MOFA's second seat at FALSG is usually held by the Party Secretary/1<sup>st</sup> vice Foreign Minister. In the few years up to 2011, the position was held by Qiao Zonghuai, then Wang Guangya, and in 2011 by Zhang Zhijun.

The primary responsibility of NSLSG is inter-agency coordination on national security affairs.<sup>47</sup> The Group's broad membership base guarantees that all relevant agencies have at least one seat at the table (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the military each have two). When a national security issue arises and the State Councilor decides it is necessary to convene an NSLSG meeting, the FAO will invite members relevant to the issue at hand.<sup>48</sup> Not all members participate at all meetings convened. At these meetings, in accordance with the principles of democratic centralism and consensus-building, members of NSLSG present information and analyses from their agencies and propose policy recommendations. This process requires the integration and reconciliation of varying opinions, along with the presentation of the diverse voices in the final policy document. Frequently, there are different perspectives between the civilian agencies and the military, between foreign policy interests and commercial interests, and between traditional and non-traditional interests such as China's soft power and international images.<sup>49</sup>

On national security issues that involve existing policies or policy implementations—when principles and guidelines have already been formulated—agencies exchange opinions and coordinate among themselves outside the NSLSG.<sup>50</sup> For example, the foreign ministry's Division of Economic Diplomacy and Cooperation at the Department of Policy Planning coordinates on economy-related foreign policy issues, usually with the commerce ministry's Department of Foreign Aid and the Department of Foreign Economic Cooperation.<sup>51</sup>

There are certain similarities between the NSLSG and the National Security Council (NSC) of the United States. Their administrators both carry the role of national security advisor (although as of 2012 the State Councilor doesn't possess that title). The members of the NSLSG very closely correspond to the "principals" in the National Security Council. Furthermore, both organizations are inter-agency policy coordination forums serving their top leaders. There are, however, major differences, some of which are:

- The NSLSG is an ad hoc committee without a regular meeting schedule.<sup>52</sup>
- The NSLSG has no fixed participant list for each meeting. Members are invited as needed, depending on their relevance to the issue. Sometimes even non-members are invited.<sup>53</sup>
- The NSLSG possesses only a small research staff (中央外办政策研究局), and primarily coordinates and relies on research by government agencies and think tanks.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Zhou Qi, "Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s," p. 52.

<sup>48</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, October 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, October 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011. And Zhou Qi, "Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s," p. 314.

<sup>51</sup> Some issues coordinated by this Division include foreign aid, foreign investment, and RMB exchange rate issues, etc. Zhou Qi, "Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s," p. 188.

<sup>52</sup> Interviews with China experts, Washington, DC, September 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

- Policy coordination by the NSLSG stops at the “principals” level and lacks a secondary layer of policy coordination, such as the Deputies Committee or the Interagency Policy Committee of the NSC.<sup>55</sup>
- The NSLSG is, by and large, a reactive crisis-management mechanism that handles strategic national security threats. It does not seek to actively administer the national security behaviors or operational details of each individual line agency, unless they result in a national security crisis.<sup>56</sup>

## **Four. Information for National Security Decision-Making**

Solid and comprehensive information forms the foundation for good national security decision-making. In China, the system of producing such information for the top leaders is extensive. It includes and goes beyond all line agencies involved in national security, as well as governmental and semi-governmental think tanks and academia. In addition to the collection and analysis of information, the system includes several layers of filters that screen and reconcile the information for decision-makers.

### **A. Information Collection and Analysis**

#### **i. Government Agencies**

Within the national security decision-making system, line agencies are the primary source of daily informational input on national security affairs.<sup>57</sup> Each line agency involved in national security, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of State Security, and PLA, provides regular reports that reflect the work and concerns specific to that agency’s focus. For example, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party prepares a daily summary for leaders on major issues and intelligence information. The watch center of the General Staff Department of the PLA delivers a daily intelligence summary and a report on the threat environment to the PB and the Party’s Central Military Commission (CMC).<sup>58</sup> The government’s public media arm, Xinhua News Agency, produces “Reference Materials” on a daily basis.<sup>59</sup>

Information collection and analysis is part of these agencies’ routine responsibility and are conducted through their internal chain of command. Using the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an example, its field offices (Chinese embassies) are its primary source of information on issues of bilateral relations. While each embassy’s Political Affairs Office and Economic Affairs Office each has its own portfolio, the Office of Policy Studies is the center of strategic analysis on local

<sup>55</sup> Interview with China experts, Washington, DC, November 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, October and November, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Bush, “The Perils of Proximity: China-Japan Security Relations,” p 137.

<sup>59</sup> “Reference Materials” is also called “Internal References” or “Grand References.” It is a special internal publication available only to cadres above a certain level within the government. Its content is mostly news and reports deemed inappropriate for the general public but necessary to keep government officials informed. Interviews with Chinese analysts, 2010.

politics, economics, and bilateral relations. Diplomatic cables send first-hand information back to Beijing, where they are reviewed and incorporated into the research report by their managing divisions.<sup>60</sup> Depending on the significance of the issue, the report will then be routed through the deputy director of the relevant department (such as the Department of North American and Oceanian Affairs), director of the department, vice foreign minister in charge of the department, then the foreign minister himself<sup>61</sup>; the more important the issue, the higher up the approval required. Upon the completion of the routing, important reports are submitted to the General Office of Central Committee as an information entry into the system.<sup>62</sup>

Other line agencies also bear responsibility for information collection and analysis used in the national security decision-making process, especially in their respective fields. The Ministry of Commerce focuses primarily on economic and trade issues, while the International Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party specializes on domestic partisan politics of foreign countries, including communist countries such as North Korea and Cuba.<sup>63</sup>

However, the two most prominent government players in the information process are the Ministry of the State Security (MSS)—China’s civilian intelligence agency, and the PLA’s General Staff Department (GSD)—its military intelligence agency. The intelligence arm of the MSS (the other arm is counter-intelligence) is in charge of information collection through open sources, technological methods, and human assets. The GSD has a similar operational style. Its Second Department (military intelligence) is responsible for comprehensive intelligence collection and analysis, and the Third Department covers signals intelligence.<sup>64</sup> In terms of procedure, the information presented by intelligence agencies follows the familiar pattern, moving from field offices to the center. Their topical coverage and networks, however, are much broader and more comprehensive than that of other line agencies.

## ii. Governmental and Semi-Governmental Think Tanks

Externally, the decision-making system also relies on governmental and semi-governmental think tanks for information on and analysis of national security affairs. These think tanks are affiliated with government agencies and act as additional research arms. For example, China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) is under the leadership of the MSS, and is “a major source for foreign policy studies that go directly to China’s top leaders.”<sup>65</sup> The

---

<sup>60</sup> MOFA has seven geographical departments and nine functional departments. Under each department, divisions are created to be responsible for one or several country(ies) or one or several functional issue(s). See the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [www.fmprc.gov.cn](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn).

<sup>61</sup> The names of the officials to whom the reports are presented are listed and attached to the report. Each one has the authority to comment and request revisions to the report. The routing process can be extremely intricate and time-consuming. In one extreme case, a report was routed through ninety-nine officials.

<sup>62</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, October 2011.

<sup>63</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, October 2011.

<sup>64</sup> Zhou Qi, “Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s”, p. 110.

<sup>65</sup> Doak Barnett, “The Making of Foreign Policy in China: Structure and Process,” Westview Press, 1985, pp123-124.

China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) is a research arm of MOFA; its experts write reports for and provide briefings to MOFA officials.<sup>66</sup> The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), affiliated directly with the State Council, conducts extensive international research.<sup>67</sup> The Central Party School has direct ties to the Party apparatus, and its reports are channeled directly to the General Office of the Central Committee.<sup>68</sup>

Generally speaking, think tanks produce two types of internal reports for national security decision-making purposes: regular reports and commissioned reports. Regular reports represent a “bottom-up” information flow pattern. For these reports, think tank researchers regularly follow one geographical or functional area and keep decision-makers updated on the latest developments in their area of expertise. Commissioned reports, on the other hand, represent a “top-down” approach. When the FAO or General Office decides that a particular issue needs more information and analysis than already provided by the line agencies, they summon research think tanks to submit studies to assist in decision-making.

A unique strength of these think tanks lies in their ability to channel and collect information from their foreign counterparts. The idea of “Track II” diplomacy has become increasingly popular among Chinese think tanks as a way to expand sources of information and build positional strengths.<sup>69</sup> The problem of this operation pattern lies in the dual role of many think tank experts between “government employees” and “independent scholars.” Their interactions with foreigners are not always risk-free and occasionally prove dangerous. Most strikingly, in recent years, increasing numbers of Chinese think tank experts have been charged with spying for foreign governments as a result of their interactions with foreign analysts, diplomats and journalists.<sup>70</sup>

For a variety of reasons, it is difficult to assess the influence of reports by think tanks and their experts on China’s national security decision-making. First of all, the information process encompasses numerous providers. Not surprisingly, this large pool of experts presents much duplication among their sources, analyses, and conclusions.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, in the national security arena, think tanks are secondary, complementary sources of information while the governmental line agencies are seen as the primary sources.<sup>72</sup> Several analysts observed that most of the “experts” invited to the FAO for briefings are government specialists, with think tank scholars a minority.<sup>73</sup> (Some scholars have been invited to deliver lecture at the “collective studies sessions”

---

<sup>66</sup> Bonnie Glaser and Philip Saunders, “Chinese Civilian Foreign Policy Research Institutes: Evolving Roles and Increasing Influence,” *The China Quarterly*, 2002, p 599.

<sup>67</sup> “Introduction of CASS,” 《我院概况》, CASS website, <http://www.cssn.cn/news/140195.htm>.

<sup>68</sup> Bonnie Glaser and Philip Saunders, “Chinese Civilian Foreign Policy Research Institutes: Evolving Roles and Increasing Influence,” p 600.

<sup>69</sup> For example, CICIR-CSIS, China Reform Forum-RAND, Tsinghua University-Carnegie Endowment all host regular Track II meetings. Discussions of these meetings are submitted to the Chinese partner’s supervisory agencies.

<sup>70</sup> The Deputy Director of Japan Institute at CASS, Jin Xide, is an example. He was charged with espionage for the South Korean government and sentenced to 14 years in prison in 2011. Interview with Hong Kong journalists, September 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Chinese analysts, October 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

of the PB, but the topics are generally broad, rather than on specific national security issues.<sup>74</sup> For example, in 2004 the Vice President of China Foreign Affairs University, Qin Yaqing, delivered a lecture to the PB on the “Global Situation and China’s Security Environment”.<sup>75</sup> Last but not least, most important decisions made within the Chinese bureaucracy are reached collectively and based on the integration and reconciliation of different opinions and voices. Therefore, it is extremely rare for one particular analysis to have a determinative effect on final decisions.

In the Chinese context, the utility and value of think tanks are judged primarily by the “written comments and instructions” from senior leaders.<sup>76</sup> Because most reports receive no feedback from the leadership, the few that do usually indicate that senior leaders are impressed by their findings. The level of that impression forms the basis for promotion or financial reward.<sup>77</sup> According to an analyst at a prominent Chinese think tank, “I am a producer of information. The senior leaders are my customers, and their written comments/instructions are the purpose of my existence.”<sup>78</sup>

## **B. Screening, Processing, and Dissemination of Information**

The collection and analysis of information for national security decision-making is the first stage in the information flow from the field offices and researchers to the top leaders. After this initial stage, the information proceeds through at least three rounds of screening and review: at the individual reporting agencies and think tanks, at the General Office of the Central Committee and FAO, and at senior leaders’ offices.

### *Tier One: Intra-agency*

Within each line agency and think tank, there is one office responsible for reviewing all reports to be submitted to the next level. The office reviews reports for their importance and quality, sometimes organizing intra-agency discussions to improve cohesiveness among various departments. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Division of Research Coordination at the Department of Policy Planning periodically convenes intra-agency meetings for macro-analysis of pertinent international issues. Given each regional department’s inclination to narrow its focus to its own area of expertise, the cooperation facilitated by Policy Planning prompts the ministry to function more like one unified body, forming objective judgments and serving as a supplier of

---

<sup>74</sup> Bo Zhiyue (薄智跃), “The Politburo’s Collective Studies System and China Model” 《政治局集体学习制度与中国模式》, *Qiushi Theory* (求是理论网), Sep 1, 2011.

[http://www.qstheory.cn/zz/gcysk/201109/t20110901\\_107049.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zz/gcysk/201109/t20110901_107049.htm).

<sup>75</sup> “Qin Yaqing: China’s Foreign Policy Framework Will Focus More on Multilateral Platforms” 《秦亚青：十七大后中国外交布局将更重视多边舞台》, Xinhua News, Oct 12, 2007. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2007-10/12/content\\_6867208.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2007-10/12/content_6867208.htm).

<sup>76</sup> This format originates from the “memorial to the throne” system in ancient China: Officials wrote their reports to the emperors on a paper folded in a unique manner. The emperors commented or issued written instructions on the same report.

<sup>77</sup> Zhou Qi, “Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s,” p. 274.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with a Chinese analyst, September 2011.

better policy recommendations for the top policy-makers.<sup>79</sup> For example, reports on North Korea must include not only the views of the Department of North America and Oceanian Affairs (in charge of U.S.-China relations) and the Department of Asian Affairs (under which North Korea falls), but also the opinions of the Department of International Organizations and Conferences (in charge of UN negotiations) and the Department of Arms Control (in charge of nuclear non-proliferation).<sup>80</sup> Critically, the Department of Policy Planning helps to reconcile sometimes conflicting priorities and ensure the general consistency of MOFA's position.

The same rule applies to the think tanks, less for policy coordination and more for quality control and management purposes.<sup>81</sup> In the case of CASS, all reports are edited by the Report Section of CASS before being sent to the General Office.<sup>82</sup> At CIIS, that role is carried out by the Office of Science and Research.<sup>83</sup> Several analysts note that CICIR follows a similar but more stringent policy of not only screening and reviewing all reports before they leave CICIR, but also requiring that reports are submitted under the organization's name rather than under the individual authors' names.<sup>84</sup>

In the case of the PLA, information from various departments is coordinated and channeled through one single outlet, the Central Military Commission.<sup>85</sup>

#### *Tier Two: The General Office of the Central Committee and FAO*

After intra-agency screening and review, all reports are submitted to the General Office of the Central Committee. The General Office, center for all information flows, is in charge of submitting reports to senior leaders and distributing information among government agencies. The General Office is more an administrative institution than a policy establishment. Its role is primarily procedural: receiving, categorizing, and distributing reports.<sup>86</sup>

Reports on foreign affairs and national security affairs also are routed to the FAO (therefore the Office of the NSLSG) from the General Office. As the foreign policy coordination institution of the Central Committee, the FAO has a much larger role to play in reviewing the content of these reports. Performing its own report summaries and analyses, the Bureau of Policy Research of the FAO determines what issues would benefit from more probing or inter-agency coordination at the FAO level. Their research results are conveyed to senior leaders as well.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Zhou Qi, "Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s," p. 75.

<sup>80</sup> Interview conducted while the author was at International Crisis Group, Beijing, July 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Zhou Qi, "Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s," p. 270.

<sup>83</sup> "Structure of CIIS: Science and Research Office", [国研所组织机构], [http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/node\\_520574.htm](http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/node_520574.htm).

<sup>84</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>85</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011. Also Zhou Qi, "Organization, Structure and Image in the Making of Chinese Foreign Policy since the early 1990s," p. 270.

<sup>86</sup> Interviews with Chinese Analysts, November 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, October 2011.

### *Tier Three: The Senior Leaders' Offices*

Although the number of secretaries assigned to each leader depends on their ranking,<sup>88</sup> the most senior leaders have a foreign affairs secretary (外事秘书) and a military secretary on staff.<sup>89</sup> These secretaries assess and filter the reports and present them to the senior leaders for review. With critical national security matters requiring the senior leaders' attention, their secretaries play the especially important role of identifying the key issues involved. For the domestic generalists without a national security background, these briefings are important in facilitating understanding and assisting decision-making.<sup>90</sup>

## **Five. Challenges in the Chinese National Security Decision-Making System**

### **A. Diffused Decision-Making Authority**

On the most critical strategic national security affairs, the Chinese decision-making system suffers from an institutional deficiency created by the structure of the political system. Sound national security decision-making requires a centralized authority able to make speedy decisions based on consistent, effective and efficient information processing and agency coordination.<sup>91</sup> A counter-example is provided in the U.S. executive branch decision-making on national security issues, where the President serves as the ultimate decision-maker and has indisputable authority to arbitrate when the system fails to produce a consensus. The National Security Council, as a part of the Executive Office of the President, assists the President in the decision-making and ensures the implementation of the policies. Such centralization is not only necessary but inevitable for sound national security decision-making.

In China, though, such centralization of authority on important, strategic issues at the top level is in fundamental conflict with the principle of "collective leadership."<sup>92</sup> On critical national security issues, the paramount leader has to return to the PBSC for a collective determination, its collaborative nature serving to boost the legitimacy of and support for just such a decision.<sup>93</sup> The extensive information collection, discussions for consensus-building and internal coordination delay the birth of a decision, usually urgently needed under a national

---

<sup>88</sup> Interviews with China analysts, Washington DC, January 2012.

<sup>89</sup> For example, Song Zhe, the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China's former ambassador to the European Union and former director of MOFA's Department of Western European Affairs, was the foreign affairs secretary of Premier Wen Jiabao. "The Secret Mission of a Close Staff of Wen Jiabao" 《温总近臣秘密任务》, April 18, 2012, *Oriental Daily*, [http://orientaldaily.on.cc/cnt/news/20120418/00176\\_091.html](http://orientaldaily.on.cc/cnt/news/20120418/00176_091.html).

<sup>90</sup> However, it should be noted that the secretaries of senior leaders are often more involved in formality than substance. For example, foreign affairs secretaries tend to be in charge of coordinating their leaders' meeting schedules with visiting foreign dignitaries or of writing speeches for such occasions. Interview with a Chinese analyst, November 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with a former U.S. government official, Washington, DC, October 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Interviews with U.S. China experts, Washington, DC, September 2011.

<sup>93</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

security crisis. However, these are seen as “necessary evils” given the political reality faced by the paramount leader and the Party.<sup>94</sup>

Collaborative decision-making is time-consuming; more significantly, collective leadership is fraught with organizational challenges, ones that can undermine the decision-making process. According to a former U.S. National Security Council official with decades of experience working on China, “National security decision-making even by one leader is difficult. Making a decision amongst nine people with different perspectives must be a nightmare for the Chinese leadership.”<sup>95</sup> Ideally, PBSC members would be above narrow agency interests, basing their decisions on an objective assessment of the situation and on strategic insights into national security. In reality, however, perspectives are inevitably shaped and colored by backgrounds, as well as personal priorities and preferences.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, in the competition and power struggle among different factions within the PBSC, objective decision-making is oftentimes overshadowed by some participants’ desires to undercut the authority of their political opponents.<sup>97</sup>

### **C. Lack of a Core National Security Coordination Team**

The Chinese national security decision-making system also suffers from the lack of a core national security team, readily available for coordination and consultation during the decision-making process. Although some similarities exist between the NSLSG in China and the National Security Council of the United States, the NSLSG’s ability to act as a core national security institution is fundamentally limited for several reasons.

First of all, the NSLSG by definition is an ad hoc committee of the Communist Party with loose organizational procedures. The NSLSG does not have a regular meeting schedule or a fixed list of regular participants. Meetings are organized only as needed, and the participant list is determined in accordance with the issue at hand. Not all members attend all meetings. Sometimes, even non-members are included in relevant meetings. Institutionally, the NSLSG lacks the required solid mechanism for effective decision coordination, let alone crisis prevention. Secondly, policy coordination by the NSLSG exists only at the level of the “principals.” The NSLSG does not seek to coordinate decisions and implementations at the deputy level or the working level. This limits the policy coordination only to critical, strategic issues, while most of the more routine national security issues are left to the autonomy of each line agency, without coordination with other agencies. This point is closely associated with the nature of the NSLSG as more of a reactive crisis-management mechanism than an everyday national security team. The NSLSG carries little role in policy implementation and does not seek to actively administer

---

<sup>94</sup> Interviews with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with a former U.S. government official, Washington, DC, October 2011.

<sup>96</sup> For example, former PBSC member Zhou Yongkang rose to power from the oil industry and is said to have special connections with large Chinese oil companies. His views on national security issues incline toward giving the energy interests of China special considerations. Also, former Premier Wen Jiabao, in charge of economic policies, and former ideology czar Li Changchun are said to prioritize economic and ideological considerations, respectively, in their national security decisions. Interviews with western diplomats in Beijing, summer 2010.

<sup>97</sup> The desire to undermine other leaders’ positions appears more common with domestic affairs. Interviews with China experts, Washington, DC, October 2011.

the national security activities of individual lines agencies or manage their operational details. For example, a policy statement from MOFA on Africa or a naval exercise by PLA in the South China Sea does not require advance approval from or coordination with the NSLSG, even though these activities could have a broader impact over other agencies.

Even if the NSLSG desired the role of core national security team, it lacks the capacity (the full-time senior policy staff). Within the Office of the NSLSG (FAO), when it examines and analyzes issues, its Bureau of Policy Studies relies primarily on research reports by government agencies and think tanks. The FAO has only a few dozen employees, more than half of whom are administrative staff.<sup>98</sup> (Originally, the FAO had a total of twenty-one staff members, including one director, two deputies and, and six bureau chiefs, leaving twelve staff for three Bureaus.)<sup>99</sup> Given its staffing structure, it would be impractical to expect the FAO to conduct independent research for objective assessment or review and evaluate information from competing agencies. Sometimes, FAO staff serve as secretaries or documenters of reports, rather than contribute valuable intellectual input to the decision-making.

Furthermore, during the Hu Jintao administration the ability of the NSLSG to coordinate national security decision-making was undercut by the weak bureaucratic position of State Councilor Dai Bingguo. As the Director of the FAO, Dai had a unique position in the process. He convened NSLSG meetings and, on many occasions, served as the personal national security advisor to the paramount leader. Within the Party hierarchy, however, Dai was not a member of the Politburo. Within the State Council hierarchy, his State Councilor position offered only a vice-premier ranking, but not a Vice Premier position with real bureaucratic power. Some foreign policy analysts argue that the authority of the FAO was substantially weakened under Dai Bingguo, especially when compared with the period Qian Qichen was in charge. Qian was not only a two-term PB member, but also ranked as the No. 2 vice premier at the State Council. This higher position conferred on Qian more authority to rein in ministerial agency players.

#### **D. Civil-Military Relations**

As a key player in the national security process, the PLA has access to multiple channels to participate in and influence decision-making. The paramount leader is the chairman of the CMC, although there are no uniformed PLA officers on the PBSC. On the PB level, the two uniformed vice chairs of the CMC are PB members.<sup>100</sup> The PLA has two representatives at the NSLSG: the Minister of Defense and the Deputy Chief of Staff of the PLA. Furthermore, information from the military is directly presented to the PBSC by the CMC.<sup>101</sup> This structure guarantees that professional military views are communicated to the key decision-makers whenever the military deems necessary.

---

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

<sup>99</sup> “Notification from the General Office of State Council on the Structure and Staff of the Foreign Affairs Office,” 《国务院办公厅关于印发国务院外事办公室职能配置内设机构和人员编制规定的通知》，State Council, 1998.

<sup>100</sup> The other vice chair of CMC, Xi Jinping, the successor of Hu Jintao, is also a member of the PBSC and PB.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Chinese analysts, November 2011.

Few believe that the Chinese military actively seeks to dictate or challenge general, significant decisions on national security, military development, or national defense priorities. Indeed, the challenge by the military to China's national security decision-making does not lie in the PLA's desire to dominate policy-making; nor is such desire evident. Rather, it comes from the great autonomy the military has over its own professional and operational details. These details are not subject to the current national security decision-making processes, yet have a major impact on China's national security policies and environment. In other words, the challenge here is not whether the Party or civilians have control over PLA actions but rather the lack of a coordinated system that provides general oversight over PLA actions with national security consequences. In recent years, such examples are increasingly prominent, highlighted by the 2007 anti-satellite missile test and the 2011 J-20 test flight.<sup>102</sup>

Multiple factors contribute to the lack of such a system. Institutionally, the military reports only to the Party and is not subject to the leadership of the State Council. Instead of being a part of the Cabinet, China's military is at the same level as the Cabinet.<sup>103</sup> The logical result of this setting should be that the civil-military coordination will take place between the State Council and CMC, under the supervision and leadership of the PBSC. In reality, however, there is no such coordination system, other than the NSLSG and its administrative office, the FAO. The problem here is that the PLA is bureaucratically senior to any ministerial government agency involved at the NSLSG, as well as to the FAO's head during the Hu Jintao administration, State Councilor Dai Bingguo. This explains Dai's failure to convince the PLA to participate in the China-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue, despite Washington's repeated requests for their presence. The breakthrough occurred only after President Hu received the request directly from President Obama and stepped in to require the PLA's participation.<sup>104</sup>

Since the death of Deng Xiaoping, no top Chinese leader has possessed the military background, personal authority, and contacts that would confer the absolute authority over the PLA enjoyed by Mao and Deng. This explanation is accepted by many Chinese civilian analysts who further argue that today's PLA is almost literally its own kingdom, intent on maintaining

---

<sup>102</sup> The controversy of the Jan 11<sup>th</sup> anti-satellite missile test was that the decision had apparently not been coordinated among various agencies within the Chinese government. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs wasn't able to provide verification or any comment until more than a week later.

The controversy of the J-20 test was that the test date coincided with the visit by U.S. Secretary of Defense Gates, and President Hu Jintao didn't appear to know the test flight had taken place. This raised questions about Hu/civilian's control of the Chinese military. PLA officers privately commented that the date of the test flights was submitted to CMC, PBSC (but not NSLSG or FAO) and approved long before Gates decided to visit China. However, they also acknowledged that there was no agency tasked for coordination or review of the possible linkage between the two events or the policy impact of the test flight.

<sup>103</sup> For example, the head of the State Council, the Premier, and the head of the Central Military Commission, the Chairman of the CMC, have the same bureaucratic ranking- Grade One (national level). The two military Vice Chairmen share the same Grade Two (deputy-national level) status with the Vice Premier and State Councilors. There is a debate on whether other members of the CMC enjoy the same Grade Two status, but, generally speaking, their bureaucratic ranking is higher than Grade Three (provincial/ministerial level). 《中华人民共和国公务员法》, April 27, 2005.

<sup>104</sup> Interviews with former U.S. government officials, Washington DC, November 2011. Senior officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had privately confessed that "we could not and dare not say anything about what we think the PLA has done wrong. It's way beyond our bureaucratic grade."

maximum operational flexibility and resisting any attempt to be brought under civilian oversight. The PLA's counter-argument is that none of today's PLA generals has the war credentials and military authority that their predecessors possessed either, in effect maintaining the old balance between civilian leaders and generals.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, the PLA argument continues, the top leaders control the promotion and career prospects of PLA generals, another key instrument of civilian authority.

This leads to another plausible explanation. Given the supremacy of the Party and its absolute authority over the PLA, if the Party doesn't want to set up a mechanism to bring the PLA under broader civilian control, it could be because the Party is reluctant to share its monopoly of the military with the State Council. It's possible that the Party prefers the PLA to remain in its unique, detached position, participating in national security decision-making only through the Party-military channels: CMC, PBSC and PB.

### **E. Narrow Agency Interests: Selective Information and Biased Analysis**

Within the system of information flow, all line agencies are responsible for reporting the latest developments and their analyses of them. At this stage, agencies attempt to manipulate decision-making by presenting reports with selective information that supports their particular policy positions. Nominally, each agency understands its work represents only a fraction of China's broad national interests, but when it comes to creating policy, each agency sees itself as the only (or the most important) representative of the whole picture. For example, with regard to North Korea, the PLA and the CCP International Department tend to focus more on traditional security threats and party friendship, while MOFA's analyses hinge more on regional stability and China's international responsibilities. All see their specific perspectives and missions as China's top priority. The result is competing viewpoints that pull the decision-making in different—at times opposing—directions.

Sometimes, the biased nature of agency reports is not only a manifestation of their interpretative differences, but also directly linked to their financial interests. Given budgetary considerations, it makes perfect sense for the PLA (especially the PLA Navy or, specifically, the South Sea Fleet) to play up and exaggerate the tensions over territorial disputes in the South China Sea, thereby creating a dire picture of U.S. orchestration of an anti-China campaign among Southeast Asian countries. A similar economic incentive prompts the Ministry of Commerce and MOFA to jointly report and lobby on the critical importance of Sino-Africa friendship, as well as anti-China sentiment in Africa. They seek justifications to apply for a larger foreign aid budget. These bureaucratic tricks are the same in China as in any other countries.

Although the think tanks are supposed to be more independent and objective in their reports and analyses, their affiliations and relationships with various government agencies sometimes compromise their objectivity as well. Think tanks rely on their managing agencies for positional, informational, and, in some cases, budgetary advantages and therefore are subject to

---

<sup>105</sup> Interviews with retired PLA officers, November 2011.

the same limits these agencies face. Furthermore, think tanks accept commissioned assignments from other agencies to write special reports. These patronage relationships inevitably color the research of the think tanks—or at least influence their priorities.

Exacerbating the situation, information sharing and intelligence integration hardly exist in the Chinese context, with each agency and think tank keen on guarding its own territory, sources, information and analysis. Since there is no sharing or integration, the compartmentalization preempts procedural reconciliation of different analyses and conflicting reports. Frequently, the under-staffed FAO or the secretaries of senior leaders take on this task. In many cases, this results in the need for additional in-depth research and discussion meetings, which are both costly and time-consuming.

## **F. Information Analysis: Struggling Between Objectivity and Existing Guidelines**

An underlying problem for information analysis in China's national security decision-making process is the constant tension between objective analysis and the need to validate existing guidelines. Objective analysis and assessment of national security threats forms the necessary foundation for sound decision-making. However, when reality conflicts with mainstream principles, the analysts must decide whether to analyze and report honestly (and most likely be ignored) or to follow and substantiate an existing doctrine. Most often and with career advancement in mind, analysts choose the second path. This tendency costs the system the opportunity to assimilate new information, reach new conclusions, and adapt its policies to deal with new situations.

This is particularly true when analyzing the role of the United States in China's national security. The tacit principle of the policy community is that the tension between the United States (status quo power) and China (revisionist rising power) is structural. Therefore, it follows, the United States is the single largest threat to China's national security and that Washington is utilizing every means possible to encircle/contain China and undermine China's national security interests. Whenever a national security issue emerges, regardless of whether it is domestic (e.g., Tibet or Xinjiang) or foreign (e.g., North Korea or the South China Sea), one dominant tone of the analysis is to blame "foreign hostile forces," especially the United States. It also has become every analyst's first instinct to highlight the U.S. factor in almost any national security challenge China faces. This tendency has become an institutional habit, directing analyses toward thorough, sometimes paranoid, investigations of any evidence of U.S. involvement. This, in turn, reinforces the existing tacit guideline that the United States *is* the fundamental challenge to China's national security. The mirror effect of this U.S.-centric mentality is the suspicion that everything the United States does must be targeted at China in some way.

In the example of the South China Sea, Chinese analysts target the United States as the primary source of tension because "the U.S. Secretary of State and military leaders intervened into the South China Sea issue with a high-profile at multiple occasions such as the ARF meeting in 2010. The support of U.S. encouraged Vietnam into major provocations... to push China into

compromises.”<sup>106</sup> During internal discussions, “U.S.-bashing” dominates the mainstream thesis. Few analysts focused on China’s lack of clarity on the nine-dashed line or its expansive interpretation of sovereign rights over the Exclusive Economic Zones, an interpretation that is in conflict with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). And even fewer analysts seriously proposed that China needs to review its own South China Sea claims and policies before finger-pointing at the United States or other claimant countries. Even when nuanced criticisms were expressed by individual analysts, they were largely ignored. In this case, China’s misplaced priority is on detecting and defending against a U.S. conspiracy rather than seeking to resolve the disputes with other claimants.

Objectivity is further compromised by the desire of all analysts to cater to what they believe the leaders wish to hear in an effort to maximize personal gains. “Those who sing a different song will not be appreciated.”<sup>107</sup> On issues related to China’s national security, the objective assessment of the situation is not the top priority for the line agencies or the analysts. Instead, they try to factor in the top leaders’ own interpretation and interests (such as concerns for his personal legacy) and eventually submit analyses and proposals that attempt to reflect those preferences, usually at the expense of a more objective and realistic analysis.

This propensity to shore up existing doctrines significantly contributes to the system’s inability to foresee, prepare for, and prevent national security threats and crisis. Problems erupt not because line agencies are unaware of the potential problems, but because they neglect information or situations that are not in line with the existing doctrine. In many ways, the information processes of China’s national security decision-making are unconsciously aimed at justifying and following the existing policies, catering to the views of the top leaders, and avoiding responsibility for policy failures. The process is extremely averse to risk, to new information, and to new, unorthodox analyses and proposals.

## **G. Legal**

As of 2012, China has almost no legislation that governs the national security decision-making process. The Constitution only generally and broadly defines the role and power of the National People’s Congress, the President, and the State Council. The rest of national security legislation is focused on how line agencies should implement national security policies. For example, the Law of National Security is legislation describing the roles, authorities, and responsibilities of the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Public Security. The role of the Party is also unaddressed.

The complete lack of national security decision-making legislation leaves the entire process unclear, un-institutionalized, and unregulated. It is responsible for the absence of clear organizations and mechanisms in the national security decision-making process. There are no defined roles and responsibilities for each agency, ad hoc committee, or individual. Therefore,

---

<sup>106</sup> Xue Hongtao, “Why Vietnam dared to play with fire in South China Sea,” 《越南为何敢在南中国海玩火》, [Legal Weekend], June 10, 2011.

<sup>107</sup> An interview with a Chinese government analyst, Beijing, November 2011.

“No matter how important the issues are, there is no rule to follow. And everyone ends up writing reports and requests, and our leaders end up overwhelmed by reviewing them.”<sup>108</sup>

## **Six. Recommendations**

Its unique political structure, especially the diffusion of decision-making authority on the top level, guarantees that China will not be able to copy the national security decision-making system of the United States.<sup>109</sup> Some measures, however, could be adopted which would strengthen the national security decision-making process. One such measure involves strengthening the authority and capacity of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Central Committee (NSLSG Office) so that it evolves into a core national security decision-making institution.

Recommendations to the Foreign Affairs Office of the Central Committee (NSLSG Office):

1. Regularize agency participation (core members should include PLA Chief of Staff, Foreign Minister, Chief of International Department, and Minister of State Security).
2. Regularize a briefing schedule (for the paramount leader on general, regular issues and for the PBSC on strategic issues) and meeting schedule.
3. Establish a military affairs center to monitor and coordinate military activities with foreign impact, such as military exercises, deployment, and important tests.
4. Codify “military activities with foreign impact,” such as military exercises, deployment and important tests.
5. Expand inter-agency coordination to include department-level and vice-ministerial level meetings.
6. Organize policy briefings and discussions for the aides (foreign affairs secretaries) of PBSC members.
7. Increase the size of the professional staff of the Office.
8. Select staff from current government employees at key agencies and research organizations.
9. Establish geographical and functional area teams at the Office responsible for reviewing agency reports.

---

<sup>108</sup> “Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume II”, 《邓小平文选》第二卷, People’s Publishing, 1994, p328.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with a China security expert, Washington, DC, October 2011.

10. Form analyses and conclusions based on independent evaluation of agency analysis and intra-agency coordination.
11. Create market segmentation among think tanks to develop their respective comparative advantages.
12. Establish collaborative information systems similar to the Open Source Center and Intellipedia of the United States.<sup>110</sup>
13. Codify the type of information each line agency has to share through the collaborative information system.

To the Politburo Standing Committee:

1. Codify the role and responsibility of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Central Committee (NSLSG Office) as the core national security institution.
2. Appoint a vice premier to head the Foreign Affairs Office.
3. Internally codify the definitions and scopes of “general, regular national security issues” (decisions to be made by the paramount leader) and “strategic national security issues” (decisions to be made by the PBSC).
4. Appoint a foreign affairs aide/secretary for each member.
5. Regularize PBSC meeting schedule for national security affairs.

To the Central Military Commission

1. Submit reports on national security affairs with a foreign dimension to both the PBSC and the Foreign Affairs Office (NSLSG Office).
2. Appoint Chief of Staff to be the PLA representative at the Foreign Affairs Office (NSLSG Office).
3. Appoint liaison officers at the military affairs center to channel information and coordinate decisions.

To the National People’s Congress

1. Pass legislation on the national security system and codify the roles, authorities, and responsibilities of decision-making, coordinating, and participating agencies.

---

<sup>110</sup> The Open Source Center (OSC) and Intellipedia are both online systems for data sharing used by the U.S. Intelligence Community.

## Seven. Conclusions

National security decision-making in China takes place within a massive and complicated system with numerous agency players throughout every layer of the bureaucracy. Along with its complexity, the opaque nature of China's political system and scarcity of available information makes the study of national security decision-making exceptionally challenging. What we know is significantly less than what we don't know. Analysts can search for the truth only from whatever information is available and accessible. Drawing conclusions is extremely difficult; some conclusions may be disproved as new information arises. Nevertheless, some general observations about the national security decision-making processes can be made, including those about the decision-making process, the policy coordination process, and the informational process.

Today's national security decision-making system of China is fundamentally different from national security decision-making under Mao and Deng. Unlike their predecessors, China's paramount leaders no longer have absolute decision-making power over national security affairs. Due to the distribution of labor and his "first among equal" status within the party, government, and military hierarchies, the paramount leader enjoys large authority in determining routine, regular, less important, and non-strategic national security issues. However, on strategic issues that affect China's broader relationships with main powers or ones that could change the existing national security guidelines, the paramount leader has to rely on the collective leadership of the Politburo Standing Committee to build consensus around the final decision. There is a fair amount of consensus-building on the top level, which is reflected in the existence of different opinions, discussions, and occasional voting to reach a conclusion.

The current system relies on the National Security Leading Small Group for inter-agency policy coordination. The membership of the NSLSG encompasses all line agencies involved in national security issues. Headed by the paramount leader and managed through the Foreign Affairs Office of the Central Committee led by a State Councilor, the NSLSG occupies the primary coordination role in the event of a national security crisis. It is the institution in China most similar to the National Security Council of the United States, in terms of roles, responsibilities, and memberships, but in many key respects lacks the crucial authority of the NSC.

The information processes of China's national security decision-making primarily focus on the information and analysis produced by line agencies and government/semi-government think tanks for raw material input. Regularly, specialists from line agencies and experts from research institutions are summoned to the Foreign Affairs Office to deliver briefings or participate in policy discussions and debates.

The current national security decision-making processes are not free of challenges. Significant problems include:

- the conflict between the need for centralized decision-making and China's political reality of diffused decision authority on the top level;

- the difficulty in placing the PLA's operational autonomy with foreign impact under effective systemized control;
- a deficiency in inter-agency policy coordination; and
- difficulty in putting aside agency interests and blind allegiance to existing doctrines in order to provide the best information.

Within the current system, better management and supervision could provide an easier fix for some of the problems. Other challenges are actually the result of the current political structure, such as the party-state-military triangular relationship and the factional politics within the political system. Tackling them requires more fundamental reforms of the current system, something that will happen neither easily nor rapidly. As China increases its international engagement, the damage caused by these challenges most likely will grow rather than decrease.