

Li Keqiang 李克强

Born 1955



Current Positions

- Premier of the State Council (2013–present)
- Member of the Politburo Standing Committee (2007–present)
- Vice-Chairman of the National Security Committee (2013–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms (2013–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Leading Group for Financial and Economic Work (2013–present)
- Vice-Chairman of the Central Military and Civilian Integration Development Committee (2017–present)
- Chairman of the Committee on Organizational Structure of the Central Committee of the CCP (2012–present)
- Chairman of the National Defense Mobilization Committee (2013–present)
- Director of the State Energy Commission (2013–present)
- Head of the National Leading Group for Climate Change and for Energy Conservation and Reduction of Pollution Discharge (2013–present)
- Head of the State Council Leading Group for Rejuvenating the Northeast Region and Other Old Industrial Bases (2013–present)
- Head of the State Council Leading Group for Western Regional Development (2013–present)
- Head of the State Council Three Gorges Project Construction Committee (2008–present)
- Head of the State Council South-to-North Water Diversion Project Construction Committee (2008–present)
- Head of the State Council Leading Group for Deepening Medical and Health System Reform (2008–present)
- Member of the Politburo (2007–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (1997–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Li Keqiang was born on July 1, 1955, in Dingyuan County, Anhui Province. Li joined the CCP in 1976. He was a “sent-down youth” at an agricultural commune in Fengyang County, Anhui (1974–76).¹ He served as party secretary of a production brigade in the county (1976–78). Li received both a bachelor’s degree in law (1982) and a doctoral degree in economics (via part-time studies, 1994) from Peking University. As an undergraduate majoring in law, Li studied under Professor Gong Xiangrui, a well-known, British-educated expert on Western political and administrative systems. Li and his classmates translated important legal works from English into Chinese, including Lord Denning’s *The Due Process of Law and A History of the British Constitution*.² As a Ph.D. student in economics, Li studied under Li Yining, a well-known economist whose theories have been instrumental in guiding China’s state-owned enterprise reform.

Li advanced his early career primarily through the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL), serving as secretary of the CCYL Committee at Peking University (1982–83). Within the Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee, Li served as alternate member (1983–85), secretary (1985–93), and first secretary (1993–98). In 1998, Li was transferred to Henan Province, where he served as governor (1998–2003) and, concurrently, deputy party secretary (1998–2002) and then party secretary (2002–04). Li then served as party secretary of Liaoning Province (2004–07). In October 2007, he was promoted to

Politburo Standing Committee member (2007–present) and, shortly thereafter, served as executive vice premier of the State Council (2008–13). He was first elected to the Central Committee as a full member at the 15th Party Congress in 1997. Li remained on the Politburo Standing Committee after the 19th Party Congress and retained his premiership for a second term at the 13th National People’s Congress in March 2018.

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Li comes from a mid-level official family. His father, Li Fengsan, was a county-level cadre in Fengyang County, Anhui.³ Li’s wife, Cheng Hong, is currently a professor of English language and literature at Capital University of Economics and Business in Beijing. She received her undergraduate degree in English at the PLA Foreign Language Institute in Luoyang and her doctoral degree in literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Science. She was a visiting scholar at Brown University in the mid-1990s. Li’s father-in-law, Cheng Jinrui, served as deputy secretary of the Henan Provincial CCYL Committee. Li’s mother-in-law, Liu Yiqing, was a journalist at the Xinhua News Agency. Li Keqiang and Cheng Hong have one daughter, who received her undergraduate degree from Peking University and later studied in the United States, according to some unverified sources.

Li is widely considered to be a protégé of Hu Jintao. Li began working in the CCYL Central Committee at the end of 1982, precisely when Hu Jintao became secretary of the CCYL. Li Keqiang worked closely with Hu, assisting him in convening the Sixth National Conference of the All-China Youth Federation in August 1983. Having been nominated by Hu, Li was promoted to alternate member of the CCYL Secretariat three months later. When Hu was made first secretary of the CCYL in 1985, Li became a full member of the Secretariat. For most of the Hu era, Li was seen as a possible successor to his mentor.

Policy Preferences and Political Prospects

In comparison to his two predecessors, Premier Zhu Rongji and Premier Wen Jiabao, Li Keqiang’s power and authority are noticeably limited—even on economic policy, which has traditionally fallen under the purview of the premier. Observers argue that Premier Li has been marginalized, as Xi has taken over all of the top posts in economic affairs.⁴ Nevertheless, in his first term as premier, Li promoted a number of policy priorities. These include township-centered urbanization (城镇化), affordable housing, employment, food security, public health care, clean energy technology, and the reduction of bureaucratic barriers for private sector development.

In particular, Li has frequently called for “mass entrepreneurship and innovation” (大众创业, 万众创新). This policy has been credited with China’s technological development over the past few years, as evidenced by the vitality of China’s e-commerce and e-payment systems. His township-centered urbanization, however, was regarded by Xi’s economic team as neither desirable (due to its resulting inefficiency of resources and widespread pollution) nor feasible (because young people are less interested in staying at small towns) and thus was largely replaced by a development strategy for large urban clusters.

At a time when Xi enjoys tremendous individual power, Li can potentially be viewed as a balancing force—though not an impressive one thus far—within the political establishment.

Compiled by Cheng Li and the staff of the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings

Notes:

¹ “Sent-down youth” (插队知青) refers to young, educated urbanites who left their home cities to serve as manual laborers in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

² Li Meng, “Li Keqiang and the class of ’77 at the Department of Law at Peking University” [李克强所在的北大法律系77级], *Democracy and Law* [民主与法制], October 26, 2009.

³ For more information about Li Keqiang’s family background and his early experiences, see Hong Qing 洪清, *He will be China’s Top Manager: The Biography of Li Keqiang* [他将是中国大管家—李克强传] (New York: Mirror Books, 2010).

⁴ Jeremy Page, Bob Davis, and Lingling Wei, “Xi Weakens Role of Beijing’s No. 2,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 2013.