

9

The Central Commission for Deepening Reform as Policy Accelerator

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Core leadership in the new era: central commissions and leading small groups

Over the past decade, political leadership in China has steadily been centralised. Reforms and adjustments have strengthened the organisations within the CPC's central leadership with Xi Jinping's authority as its "core", while streamlining state administrations and ministries. Party ideology for the New Era further cements Xi's role and the indisputable authority of the central CPC leadership. The message: the Party leads everything, and Xi leads the Party.

A main mechanism to bring Xi's central leadership into organisational practice has been the strengthening of central leading small groups (LSGs) and commissions, chaired either by Xi personally or by one of his trusted deputies. These core executive organs are the commanding heights of decision-making within the central leadership. This chapter homes in on the Central Commission for Deepening Reform (CCDR) to illustrate how Xi's influence over strategic policymaking has been institutionalised, and discusses how the CCDR exercises a key role in defining and coordinating domestic structural reforms.

LSGs and commissions are neither new nor uncommon organisations in the Chinese bureaucracy. They have existed as long as the CPC has been in power, numbering in the tens of thousands across the administration. LSGs often serve as missing joints to connect otherwise separate bureaucratic party-state agencies, such as ministries or departments of a local government. When decisions with inter-departmental/ministerial relevance need to be coordinated,

they integrate leadership and decision making by bringing the leaders of all party and state agencies concerned together. The group's chair usually outranks these leaders by at least half a bureaucratic rank, providing the authority to make and enforce decisions across all members of the group. LSGs thus use one of the most valuable resources in the Chinese bureaucracy—administrative rank—to overcome problems of poor coordination, non-compliance or even sabotage.

During the administrative restructuring of 2018, several LSGs were turned into central commissions. These commissions have gone beyond being mere organs of deliberation and coordination. As we shall see below, they have become tools of active governance and control, and the locus of the CPC's centralised rule under Xi.

The Central Committee for Deepening Reform as Xi's key policymaking vehicle

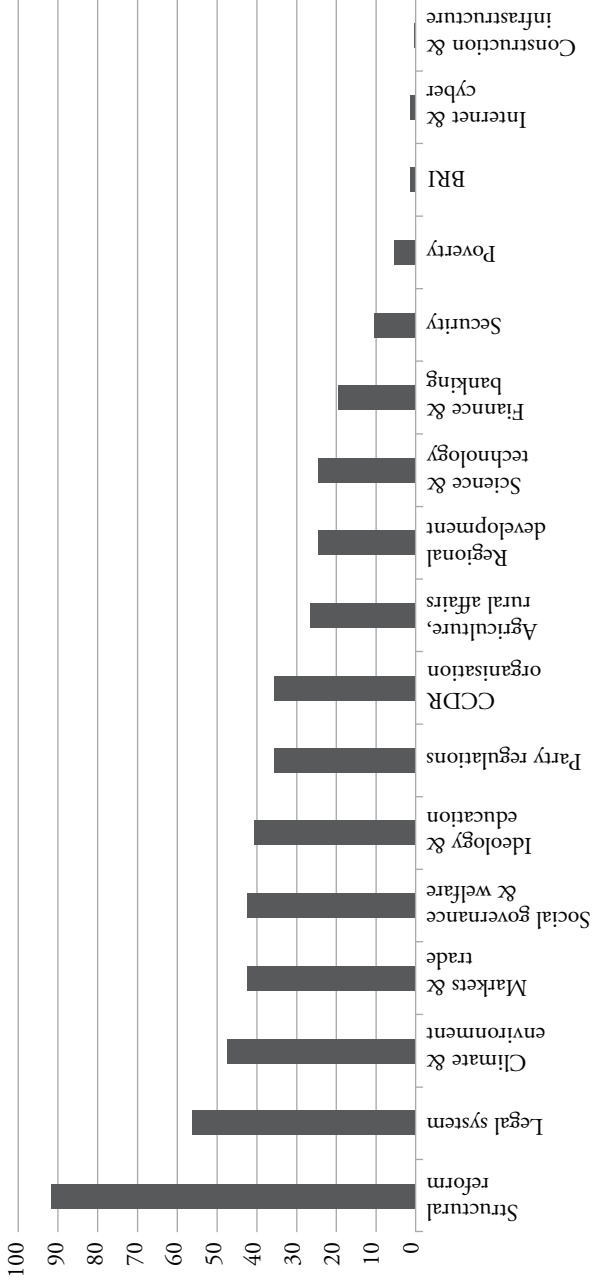
The CCDR has become the primary instrument for “top-level design” policymaking. As a CPC organ under Xi's chairmanship, in practice it outranks all other decision-making bodies of the state administration, including the National Development and Reform Commission and even the State Council. This further institutionalises the CPC's direct grip over strategic policymaking and the state apparatus.

The CCDR was initially formed in 2013 to oversee and coordinate the implementation of the Central Committee Third Plenum's *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform*.¹ The CCDR has local branches at the provincial, city and county levels, likewise coordinating the implementation of policy. Compared to other central commissions, the CCDR is special in its integration in policymaking processes. For instance, there is no evidence that the National Security Commission (see the chapter by Joel Wuthnow in this volume) delegates tasks as systematically as the CCDR does.

The CCDR is organised into six subgroups, each with its own office and managing director:

1. Economic and ecological civilisation system reform
2. Democratic and legal system reform
3. Cultural system reform
4. Social system reform
5. Party building system reform
6. Discipline inspection system reform

Figure 9.1 Policies Deliberated by the CCDR, Categorized by Topical Focus



Note: “CCDR organisational” refers to the CCDR’s internal work reports.

Source: MERICS Policy Database, calculations by authors.

The CCDR thus started as a LSG for a specific, time-limited task. However, thanks to its success, the CCDR (alongside four other central LSGs) was converted into a commission in 2018. With at least two dozen ministerial-rank leaders gathered under Xi's chairmanship in the CCDR, and the specific task to drive the policy priorities of his administration, it embodies the individualised centralisation of power under Xi. And it is used frequently: between its first meeting in early 2014 and the end of 2021, the CCDR has convened 61 times, deliberating on no less than 516 policy documents.

The portfolio of policy issues deliberated in the CCDR (see Figure 9.1) shows that it sticks to issues pertaining to domestic structural reforms, while leaving security (including public order) and defence, cyber and foreign affairs to other party commissions. In line with its sub-groups' themes and its mandate to steer top-level design, it deliberates mainly on structural and legal reforms of the Party and the state, on policies relating to strategic infrastructure and industry, as well as social, macro-economic and environmental issues. This general portfolio competes with the responsibilities of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the State Council. What remains unclear at this point is how the CCDR coordinates or perhaps supervises the work of one or more of the commissions or LSGs with a more specialised remit, such as law and governance or finance and economy.

The CCDR as a policy accelerator

The CCDR is used not only to deliberate on and approve strategic policies but also for its members to report on progress. The tasks of its local branches are similar to those of the central CCDR. This means that the CCDR and its work plan (issued yearly) essentially set a priority task list for governments at both the central and local levels. Key policy areas are coordinated by the CCDR, with the drafting and implementation of actual policies delegated to government ministries or CCDR local branches. Progress on these tasks is tracked through reports submitted to CCDR meetings and subgroups. In practice this means that the central CCDR's national work plan directly sets, delegates and monitors priority policies across the administration.

An important factor enabling the CCDR's function as a policy accelerator is its ability not only to assign and supervise policy drafting, but also formally to pass it. Once the CCDR has passed a policy, it is considered to have gone into effect, unless specifically stated otherwise. This makes the CCDR different from other central commissions, which (at least judging from available information) do not sign off on policy. Our analysis of the policy documents passed by the

central CCDR suggests that often weeks or even months go by between the CCDR's passing of a policy and the formal promulgation of that same policy, for instance by the State Council, the NDRC or a ministry. This is significant, since strictly speaking the CCDR, as party organ, does not have formal authority to make state law and policies.

A concrete example of this process is the creation of national parks. Setting up a system of national parks was one of the tasks put forth by the 2013 Central Committee *Decisions*, the founding document of the CCDR. In 2015 under the leadership of the NDRC, a pilot plan to set up national parks was issued. At the same time, several individual parks were planned (today a total of 10 have been established), again with the NDRC in the lead. In July 2017, the CCDR passed the *General System Plan for Establishing National Parks*, ending the trial period. Two months later, this plan was formally issued jointly by the State Council and the CPC Central Committee. Meanwhile, starting in 2015, the NDRC reported to and received guidance on drafting plans for individual parks from the CCDR, with its subgroup on Economic and Ecological Civilization System Reform (directed by Liu He) in charge of coordinating the process.

Several of the plans for individual national parks also went through this process. The NDRC reported to the CCDR during the drafting phase and submitted both trial and final versions of the planning document for deliberation and passing by the CCDR. All plans were later formally publicised either by the State Council (the national plan) (*Zhonggong zhongyang* 2017), or the NDRC (plans for individual parks such as the Giant Panda National Park) (Guojia fazhan 2021). A 2019 draft seeking public opinions on the General Outline on the National Panda Park even mentions Xi Jinping speaking about the park during a meeting of the Central LSG for Economy and Finance (which is also a commission today) (Guojia linye 2019).

There are indications that local CCDR branches mirror the central CCDR's function of fast-tracking policy decisions by issuing task lists. How proactive local CCDR branches are differs. For example, the Henan province CCDR announced its successful coordination of, among others, the "River Chief" system (for flood warning and waterway safety), and announced completed delegation of 176 key tasks for 2021 to the relevant units.² The CCDR branch in Dali county (Shaanxi) published a list of 24 very general reform items (e.g. "continue to improve the business environment") on its task list for 2020 (*Zhonggong dali* 2020). There even are structures equivalent to the CCDR in large state-owned enterprises. These examples suggest that the CCDR has become pervasive across the administrative structure with branches reaching all the way down to

the county level and with the political authority to define key policy tasks and delegate them to individual departments.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping chairs all important central party LSGs and commissions, extending his influence across all strategic policy areas. Among these LSGs and commissions, the CCDR serves as the core instrument for top-level design policymaking and implementation. The CCDR is not just one of the largest and most powerful organs at the central level, but also defines and delegates tasks at lower levels.

Many party LSGs and commissions have existed for decades; Xi has institutionalised a select few of them as formal executive organs of the Party at the expense of the state. Among them, the CCDR remains special in its degree of involvement and control over policymaking and implementation. It is unmatched in its mandate to define policy tasks, coordinate and delegate implementation, and therefore serves as a prime policy accelerator for the political programme of the central leadership and Xi Jinping.

The CCDR can be seen as a typical product of the hierarchy-based bureaucracy of the party-state, in which, to gain control over decision making, leaders create or reorganise agencies that outrank existing ones. Upgrading central LSGs and commissions into the core of policymaking can thus be seen as a move by Xi to impose his policy programme onto a fragmented and inert system in which inter-ministerial contests and local-level obstruction remain a problem. However, it is likely that they merely transplant implementation issues to other parts of the bureaucracy. Solving decision making bottlenecks for the specific issues the CCDR concerns itself with does not resolve the deeply rooted structural issues of China's fragmented authoritarianism in other policy areas.

Notes

¹ The official English translation of the Decision is available online at http://www.china.org.cn/china/third_plenary_session/2014-01/16/content_31212602.htm, 16 January 2014 (accessed 4 May 2022).

² Zhonggong henan shengwei quanmian shenhua gaige weiyuanhui 2021 nian gongzuo yaodian 《中共河南省委全面深化改革委员会2021年工作要点》专题发布会 [Special press conference on the work points of the Comprehensively Deepening Reform Committee of the Henan Provincial Party Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2021]. Available at <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/henan/Document/1701427/1701427.htm> (accessed 30 July 2022).

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