

## **Small yet influential: China's Leading Small Groups**

"Leading small groups" (LSG, 领导小组 *lingdao xiaozu*) are also called "coordination groups" (协调小组 *xietiao xiaozu*), "working groups and selected committees" (工作组和部分委员会 *gongzuo he bufen weiyuanhui*) or "small groups" (小组 *xiaozu*). Since the Maoist era, such groups have been formed in addition to established political institutions to deal with important, extraordinary, or urgent matters. These groups carry great weight for decision-making in cross-cutting areas, as they plan and coordinate policy decisions among various government and party departments. However, they do not formulate and implement final policies, but rather develop consensus-based recommendations and guidance. Until a few years ago, LSGs most-often remained out of the spotlight and gathered only little to no attention from the public. Reports from the Chinese media on the activities of LSGs were rare.

This changed with their reorganization and re-establishment in 2013. Since then, more and more information about LSGs has been made publicly available through Chinese media, government publications, and academic studies.

The following blog post summarizes the main characteristics of LSGs in terms of their different types and categories, their organizational structure, their mode of operation as well as their internal connectedness.

### **1. Types and Categories**

According to Zhou Wang (associate professor at the Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University), LSGs can be divided into the following three types depending on their time horizon: permanent, medium-term, and short-term.

The most important and high-ranking LSGs are permanent. Permanent LSGs deal with broad policy areas such as foreign policy, economy, and education. They have a fixed task area and remain active for a longer period of time. Examples for permanent LSGs include the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission (中央财经委员会) as well as the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (中央外事工作委员会).

Medium-term LSGs are often formed in order to coordinate a more specific or regular task. Their active period usually lasts between one and ten years. Once their task is completed, they are disbanded. Examples for LSGs which are active in the medium term include the "Leading Small Group for China's First Economic Census" (2003-2005) (中国第一次经济普查领导小组) and the "Three Gorges Project Construction Commission of the State Council" (1993- 2018) (国务院三峡工程建设委员会).

Short-term or ad hoc LSGs are usually formed to deal with natural disasters, widespread social upheaval, general crisis situations as well as construction projects. The group of short-term LSGs comprises the majority of LSGs. This group includes, among others, the "Beijing Olympic Committee and Leading Small Group for Paralympic Games" (2008) (北京奥委会和残奥会领导小组) and the "Central Leading Small Group for Work to Counter the New Coronavirus Infection Pneumonia Epidemic" (2020) (中央应对新型冠状病毒感染肺炎疫情工作领导小组).

Overall, LSGs address a wide range of topics whilst primarily serving political-economic objectives. LSGs can be grouped into the following six categories:

- Organization and Personnel (组织人事类 zuzhi renshi lei)
- Publicity, Culture and Education (宣传文教类 xuanchuan wenjiao lei)
- Politics and Law (政治法律类 zhengzhi falü lei)
- Economy and Finance (财政经济类 caizheng jingji lei)
- Foreign Policy and United Front (外事统战类 waishi tongzhan lei)
- Party Structure and Party Affairs (党建党务类 dangjian dangwu lei)



Figure 1: LSG Categories

## 2. Organizational structure and Mode of Operation

Different LSG's are structured in a similar way, as their organizational structure follows a uniform basic pattern on all administrative levels:

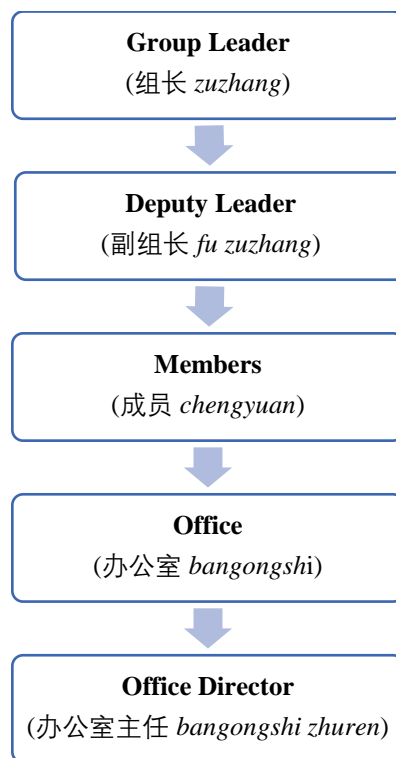


Figure 2: Vertical Structure of a typical LSG

The group leader, who is generally represented by the party secretary of the respective administrative level, possesses considerable authority. He is being supported by up to four deputy leaders, most of whom are also deputy party secretaries. Furthermore, the respective administrative unit is represented by its head of government who is included in the LSG as a deputy leader. The members of the LSG are usually made up of the heads or deputy heads of the individual departments. Their number depends on the nature of the task. Each LSG also has an office where day-to-day work is done and evaluations are prepared based on the input from group members and the research from think tanks close to the government. To prepare for group meetings, the office conducts intensive research and gathers the most recent information available. The office director oversees departmental administrative coordination and handles the administrative work (文秘事务 wenmi shiwu). He is responsible for drafting documents, collecting the required information as well as supervising and controlling.

LSGs exist on all levels of the party and government organization. However, as an informal institution, they lack a constitutional and legal basis. For this reason, their mode of operation seems more personalized than following specific rules and norms. At the central level, LSGs personnel assembles for a meeting about once a month. At lower levels, meetings are less frequent.

With their special structure and mode of operation, LSGs enable the rapid collection of resources and thereby support the communication and cooperation amongst different departments. This enables a high degree of flexibility in the Chinese political system.

### 3. LSG Networks

LSGs can be cross-sectional, meaning that they can work in more than one system (系统 xitong). Cross-sectional LSGs include, for example, the "Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms" (中央全面深化改革委员会), the "Central Cybersecurity and Informatization Commission" (中央网络安全和信息化委员会) as well as the "National Security Commission" (中央国家安全委员会). All of these commissions are chaired by Xi Jinping personally and encompass multiple systems, which in turn contain their own LSGs. Such cross-sectional LSGs strengthen the centralized control of various departments and commissions and enable the establishment of consolidated decision-making and coordination bodies. The following illustration depicts a cross-sectional LSG using the National Security Commission as an example:

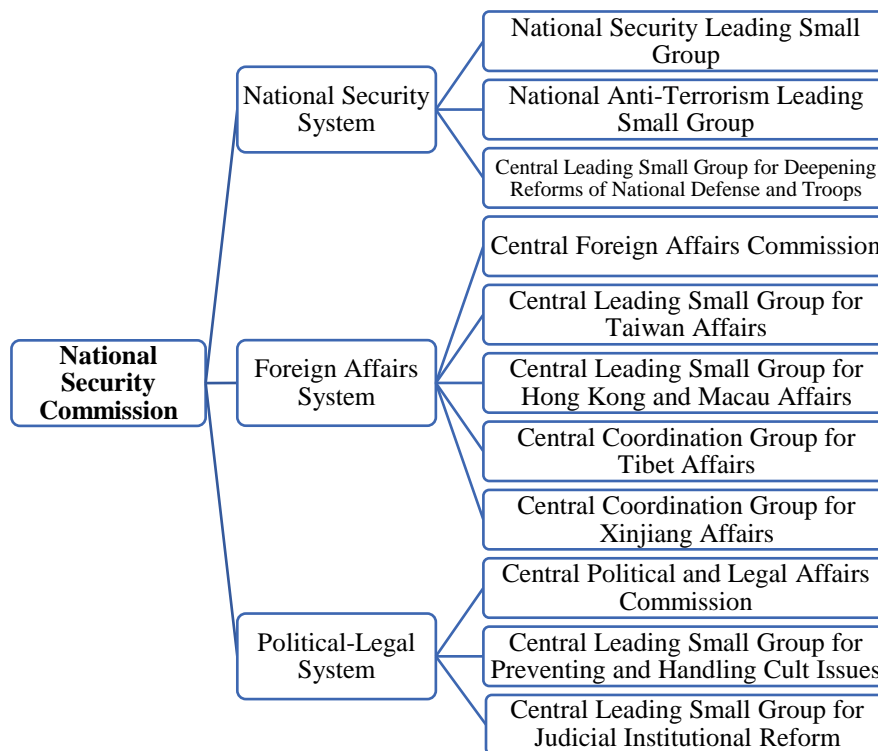


Figure 3: National Security Commission

## Conclusion

In summary, the establishment of LSGs not only illustrates the increased perceived relevance of the policy area in question and highlights the significance of a particular policy issue, but also signals a trend in Chinese politics, where small groups increasingly take upon a substantial leadership role. Despite their small size, Leading Small Groups exert a substantial influence on the policy-making process and thereby form a core part of Chinese politics. It should be noted, however, that LSGs have yet to find their place in China's current legal system; it is therefore too early to assess their influence on future reform plans.

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