



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

New Chinese leadership and Tibet

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March 22, 2023

This year's annual meetings of China's National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—popularly called the “Two Sessions” (Chinese: Lianghui)—saw a markedly lower level of focus on Tibet than in recent years.

The “Two Sessions,” held from March 4 to 13, 2023, expectedly cemented Xi Jinping's authority by extending his term as President of the People's Republic of China.

Unlike in the past, this year there were no special press conferences by leaders of the Tibetan delegation, nor were any statements on Tibet made by Chinese leaders.

In the past, during the “Two Sessions” in 2021, [Xi Jinping participated in the deliberations of the Qinghai delegation](#) and even recalled his visit to Yushu after the earthquake of 2010. During the 2022 “Two Sessions,” the Chinese Communist Party-selected Panchen Lama was reported by Chinese state media outlet Xinhua on March 11, 2022 as telling Tibetans, “It is an unequivocal mission for us to unswervingly uphold the leadership of the CPC [Communist Party of China] without hesitation.”

However, as mandated, this year's “Two Sessions” put into office a new set of leaders (both the NPC and CPPCC chairs have had connections to Tibetans) whose possible impact on Tibet policy is yet to be assessed.

Wang Huning and ‘Central Tibet Work Coordination Group’

The first new leader who would have a decisive role in Tibet policy is Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning, who is the new Chairman of China's top political advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Successive chairs of the CPPCC have headed the Central Tibet Work Coordination Group (Chinese: Zhongyang Xizang Gongzuo Xietiao Xiaozu), which has become the main coordinating agency under the Chinese Communist Party. It can be assumed that Wang will be heading the Group.

Wang was a [member of the Tibet Autonomous Region delegations](#) to the 11th and 12th National People's Congress (NPC), the Chinese Parliament, in 2008 and 2013, respectively. Wang also participated in the deliberations of the delegation of Qinghai during the 2018 NPC session, according to state media. Qinghai is a traditional Tibetan area, including being the birthplace of the present 14th Dalai Lama. As Wang was involved in [some of the deliberations](#) during this period, he would have some understanding of the Tibetan issue.

Wang [had been in charge of ideology, the propaganda apparatus and Party organization](#), heading the secretive Central Policy Research Office. He has worked with China's former top leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, and now continues to be influential under Xi Jinping.

In November 2012, during the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress, Wang participated in the discussions of the delegation from the Tibet Autonomous Region on then-leader Hu Jintao's report. State media reported Wang as having praised Hu Jintao and “fully affirmed Tibet's remarkable achievements in economic and social development.” Further, Wang is reported to have said, “The work in Tibet has important strategic significance in the overall work of the party and the country.”

Very little is known about the composition and activities of the “Central Tibet Work Coordination Group.” But the concept of such coordinating groups with specialized tasks has been there as part of the Chinese Communist governance system under the name of “Leading Small Groups” (lingdao xiaozu, 领导小组). China analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies said in a [report in 2017](#) that this concept was expanded under Xi Jinping's rule, although its origin can be traced back to the revolutionary period. They further said that Leading Small Groups “are coordinating bodies that address important policy areas that involve several different (and occasionally competing) parts of the bureaucracy” and that the Party continued to rely on these institutions as a key coordinator of policy. They added that the groups are much more involved in the policy process under Xi Jinping than ever before.

The United Front Work Department, the CCP's organ tasked with outreach to non-Communists, is the “Central Tibet Work Coordinating Group's” main implementation agency. As per tradition, its current head, Shi Taifeng, has also been appointed as a vice chair of the CPPCC. The United Front has been charged with outreach to the Tibetan people, both within Tibet and in exile through overt and covert activities, including through its staff who are posted as “diplomats” in some of the Chinese embassies and consulates in India, Nepal, Australia, Canada, the United States and Europe. Until 2005, when a separate seventh bureau was set up on Tibet affairs, the United Front's second bureau dealing with religion and ethnic affairs oversaw Tibet. Since 2018, [the United Front's role has been strengthened by putting the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, a government office that also has a role on Tibet](#), under it.

Interestingly, the “Central Tibet Work Coordination Group” appears to have multiple research groups under it. At least two such research working groups, one on foreign affairs and the other on economic and social development, have been conducting fact-finding trips and organizing events on Tibet. The Group has also been tasked with organizing the Tibet Work Forums, seven of which have been held since 1980, the [most recent one being in August 2020](#). In fact, Wang attended the seventh forum, during which Xi Jinping outlined his policy on the assimilation of Tibet, including saying, “It is necessary to actively guide Tibetan Buddhism to adapt to the socialist society and promote the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism.”

Former United Front Vice Minister Sithar (Si Ta), who is Tibetan, has been identified by Chinese state media as the deputy head of the “Central Tibet Work Coordinating Group.” Sithar has been with the United Front for many years, including serving in Chinese embassies and consulates in India and Switzerland as part of the strategy to win over Tibetans in the diaspora. Sithar had also been part of the Chinese official team that conducted the dialogue process with envoys of His Holiness the Dalai Lama during the 2002-2010 period. He retired from the United Front in 2016.

As on Tibet, a similar “Central Xinjiang Work Coordination Group” has also been set up.

Former Qinghai Secretary is NPC Chair

Politburo Standing Committee member Zhao Leji is the new Chairman of the National People's Congress, likely to have a say on Tibet policy. He is the only member in the Politburo with many years of experience working with Tibetans. He was born in the traditional Tibetan area known now as Qinghai province and began his career there in 1974. He has spent most of his working life there, moving up the leadership ladder until his transfer in 2007 as Secretary of Shaanxi Provincial Party Committee.

Zhao's record on Tibet to date does not look promising. As Qinghai's Party Secretary, Zhao was [prominent in efforts to "combat foreign hostile forces](#), in particular, the 14th Dalai Clique's infiltration and sabotage activities in Qinghai Province," according to the Chinese state media.

Zhao also headed the Central Organization Department and the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, thus becoming the main person behind Xi Jinping's 'anti-corruption' campaign. In [Tibet, the campaign had also been used in attempts to extinguish loyalty to the Dalai Lama](#), with Party officials "who have fantasies about the 14th Dalai Clique" being warned of punishment.

During the "Two Sessions" in 2018, Zhao attended the deliberations of the delegation from the Tibet Autonomous Region at the 13th NPC session. Chinese state media reported on his attendance, saying, "Secretary Zhao Leji listened and took notes, and had in-depth exchanges with everyone on relevant issues from time to time."

Further, "Zhao Leji fully affirmed the development and stability of Tibet and the various tasks of party building. He emphasized that the party's style of work is related to the support of the people and the life and death of the party." A Chinese state media report in Tibetan then said that Zhao specifically called for the implementation of an eight-point regulation adopted by the Communist Party of China Central Committee, on improving work style in eight aspects, focusing on rejecting extravagance and reducing bureaucratic visits and meetings.

Zhao also attended the Seventh Central Tibet Work Forum in 2020.

Interestingly, Zhao's [father Zhao Ximin also worked in Qinghai and is said to have had a personal relationship with Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun](#). Zhao senior, who died in 1999, was deputy head of Tsoshar (Haixi) Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and had also served as deputy editor of Qinghai Daily.

Xi Jinping prioritizes security

In his [speech to the NPC on March 13, 2023](#), President Xi Jinping reiterated his focus on security, saying, "Security is the foundation of development and stability is the prerequisite for prosperity. We must resolutely pursue a holistic approach to national security, improve the national security system, strengthen our capacity for safeguarding national security, enhance public security governance, and improve the social governance system." This can only mean that even in Tibet, the securitization at all levels will not only continue, but also be strengthened. There were mere tangential references to "ethnic groups" in Xi's speech, although Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan were identified. As part of the strengthening of the CCP's hold, some observers say that the offices dealing with Hong Kong and Macau that are currently under the State Council will now be placed under the direct supervision of the Party.

Newly appointed Prime Minister Li Qiang did not give any indications about his views on issues like Tibet in his hour-long press conference following the “Two Sessions.” He also does not appear to have had any connections to Tibet in the past. However, his position as the Premier means that he may be called upon to talk about Tibet in his interactions with foreign leaders, given Tibet’s role in China’s international relations. Previous Premiers, including Wen Jiabao, have had to address Tibet during such foreign engagements.

But one of Li’s new vice premiers, Zhang Guoqing (also a Politburo central committee member), although having no apparent Tibet background, could be involved as a member of the Tibet policy circle. In January 2023, Chinese state media reported that he was one of the four nominees from the leadership in Beijing as a delegate from the Tibet Autonomous Region to the just concluded NPC session. They also reported his attendance at a plenary meeting of the Tibet Autonomous Region delegation to the NPC on March 5, 2023, to review the government work report made by outgoing Premier Li Keqiang.

Zhang is from Henan province and a former corporate executive who subsequently became CCP Secretary of Liaoning province. China watchers see Zhang as part of the sixth generation of Chinese leadership. Given that much of his career was spent as a corporate executive rather than in politics, his involvement in Tibet-related matter needs further scrutiny. It could be an indication about the authorities wanting to focus on the economic development of Tibet.

At the time of this report, Zhang’s specific portfolio as a vice premier has not been outlined.

No Tibetan among national-level Ministers

No Tibetan finds a place among the Ministers under the Li Qiang government. In fact, to date only one Tibetan, Dorje Tsering (Duoji Cairang), has served at the level of a Minister in Beijing. Dorje is from Kanlho (Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu Province. He was posted in the Tibet Autonomous Region, eventually climbing up the bureaucratic ladder. In 1983, he became Vice Chairman of the region and Chairman in 1985. He was Deputy Minister of Civil Affairs in May 1990 and made a Minister in March 1993, serving in that position till March 2003, when he was made Chairperson of the NPC Ethnic Affairs Committee. While serving as Minister of civil affairs, Dorje Tsering also engaged [with President Jimmy Carter](#), whose Carter Center had a program of advising the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs since 1998 in projects to improve the process of democracy at the village level and to standardize electoral procedures in China.

However, to date no Tibetan has ever been in any post above the Minister level, whether as State Councilor or Vice Premier.

National-level Tibetan leaders

The “Two Sessions” this year saw the elevation of Lobsang Gyaltzen (Luosang Jiangcun) as one of the two main national-level Tibetan leaders after he was announced as one of the 14 Vice Chairs of the NPC on March 10, 2023. Gyaltzen, who currently heads the TAR People’s Congress too, replaced Pema Thinley (Baima Chillin) in the position.

According to his official bio, he is from Dragyab in eastern Tibet and joined the party in 1978. His career path included being Deputy Party Secretary of Nagchu (Naqu), as well as that of Lhasa City. He

also served as Lhasa Mayor before [becoming a Vice Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region government in 2003](#). He received successive promotions thereafter and in December 2012 became Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region government. He visited the [United States and Canada in 2014](#) while in this position as part of a Chinese strategy to project an impression that the situation in Tibet was normal and harmonious. In 2017, he became head of the Tibet Autonomous Region People's Congress.

On March 10, 2023, at the 14th National People's Congress, Gyaltsen was elected as the Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the NPC.

The NPC Standing Committee includes one Tibetan, Jamyang Shepa, among senior the lamas of the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, who is the abbot of Labrang Tashikyil Monastery in Kanlho (Gannan). His full name is Jamyang Lobsang Jigme Thupten Choekyi Nyima, and he has a range of religious and political positions. He is currently a member of the Standing Committee of the 14th NPC, Deputy Director of the Standing Committee of the 14th Gansu Provincial People's Congress, Vice President of the Buddhist Association of China, Dean of the Advanced Buddhist Institute of the Chinese Tibetan Language Department, President of the Buddhist Association of Gansu Province, and President of Gansu Buddhist Academy.

The other Vice Chair at the national level is the long-lasting Phakpalha Gelek Namgyal (Pabala Gelie Langjie), who was re-appointed one of the 23 vice chairs of the CPPCC, also on March 10, 2023. Phakpalha has been on and off in this position since the 1970s. Eighty-three-year-old Phakpalha, a reincarnation of a lama from Chamdo, also continues to be the head of the Tibet Autonomous Region CPPCC. Current United Front head Shi Taifeng and former TAR deputy party secretary Hu Chunhua are also CPPCC vice chairs. As an aside, Hu is reported to be [“fluent Tibetan speaker.”](#)

Below them, five Tibetans are listed as being on the CPPCC Standing Committee, which has a total of 299 members.

1. Tashi Dawa (Zhaxi Dawa) from Bathang in Kardze (Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan, is a writer. In January 2018, he was elected as a member of the 13th CPPCC and vice chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region CPPCC.
2. Dorjee Raptan (Douji Redan) is a politician from Amdo (Qinghai). In 2008, he was elected as a member of the CPPCC and was also Chairman of the Qinghai PPCC. In addition to being on the Standing Committee, he is a Deputy Director of the Ethnic and Religious Committee of the CPPCC National Committee.
3. Che Dralha (Qi Zhala) is a Tibetan from the Kham area in Yunnan Province and was heading the Dechen Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture there before being moved to Lhasa. In 2021, he was moved from being the Tibet Autonomous Region Chairman to serve as the Vice Chairman of the Ethnic Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress. Tibet watchers had expected that Che Dralha would rise up in the party hierarchy, but it appears that he will now be relegated to a nominal CPPCC position. In addition to being on the Standing Committee, he is a deputy director of the CPPCC's Agriculture and Rural Committee.
4. Drupkhang Thubten Khedrup (rendered in Chinese reports as Trukang Thupden Keldro or Zhukang Tubdankezhub) is a 69-year-old said to be the seventh reincarnation of a Gelug lama from Nagchu. Although he underwent imprisonment by the Chinese authorities for some years, after his release in 1979, he became one of the ardent torchbearers on behalf of the Party and [has been a prominent critic of the Dalai Lama](#). In 2012, at the height of the wave of Tibetan self-immolations, he accused the Dalai Lama of inciting these actions. He has moved up the ranks of the People's Political Consultative Conference as well as the Chinese Buddhist

Association. Interestingly, [a former abbot as well as monks of his monastery in Nagchu, Shapten Monastery, have been facing persecution](#) at the hands of the Chinese authorities.

5. The China-selected Panchen Lama. This is the highest position that has been assigned to Gyaltzen Norbu, whom the CCP selected in November 1995 to be its Panchen Lama after disappearing Gendun Choekyi Nyima, the Panchen Lama recognized by the Dalai Lama. Some observers expected that he would be appointed at least as a Vice Chair of the CPPCC.

Additionally, Penpa Tashi (Bianba Zhaxi) from Lhoka in Tibet, who rose up quickly in the Tibet Autonomous Region, is identified being a deputy director of the Ethnic and Religious Committee of the CPPCC National Committee. He does not find a place in the Standing Committee though. After several years of working at different positions in the Tibet Autonomous Region and also in Beijing, where he was head of the seventh Bureau of the United Front, he became a Deputy Director of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) in 2020. He was expected to move up the chain of authority. He is a member of the party group and Deputy Director at SEAC and Deputy Director of the Ethnic and Religious Committee of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. During one of the meetings with the envoys of the Dalai Lama in the dialogue process between 2002-2010, he was involved as part of the Chinese government team.

While the above are in the Standing Committee, the following Tibetans are also listed as being members of the CPPCC Committees (which has 99 members).

1. Gonpo Tashi (Gongbao Zhaxi) is from Amdo in eastern Tibet (now Qinghai). He is Chairman of Qinghai Provincial Committee of the CPPCC. He had also served in Lhasa as the head of the Tibet Autonomous Region United Front, Vice Chair of the government and a Deputy Party Secretary. He was moved from Lhasa to Qinghai in 2016 as head of the provincial United Front.
2. Cui Yuying, who is identified as a Tibetan, was the Chairman and Party Secretary of Fujian Provincial CPPCC. In addition to being on the committee, she is a Deputy Director of the Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Overseas Chinese Committee of the CPPCC National Committee.

Another Tibetan, Alai, also finds a place in the CPPCC committee. He is a writer from Barkham in eastern Tibet. According to his bio, his mother is Tibetan and his father is Hui. In 2018, he was elected as a representative of the 13th National People's Congress. He is listed under the "Independent" category in the CPPCC committee.

Some observers say that these national-level appointments, in particular when they are for the Political Consultative Conference, generally do not involve governance and high-level decision-making on policy and are rewards for loyalty to the party. Be that as it may, following the passing away of the 10th [Panchen Lama](#) (in 1989), [Ngawang Jigme Ngapo](#) (in 2009) and [Phuntsog Wangyal Goranangpa](#) (in 2014), no Tibetan has had a visible presence at the national level of the Chinese leadership. Tibetan observers have said that one reason could be that there is no one under the current Chinese system who commands authority over the Tibetan people like these three personalities did.

No visible Tibet references

This year's "Two Sessions" did not see any visible references to the political aspects of the Tibetan issue. However, Chinese state media reported on "proposals" and "recommendations" made by some

Tibetan delegates to the “Two Sessions” on different aspects of non-political life, including
"Recommendations on Supporting Tibet's Creation of National Ecological Civilization Highlands."



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