

## The Emergence of the Central Office of Foreign Affairs: From Leadership Politics to “Great Diplomacy”

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This essay examines how the Central Office of Foreign Affairs (COFA) has risen within the Chinese party-state system to become an institutional lynchpin overseeing all Chinese foreign conduct, and it takes this institution as a window to peer into Chinese leadership politics involving the party chief’s control of foreign affairs and the recent proposed program of “greater diplomacy.” It argues that both leadership politics and the program of “greater diplomacy” have driven the concentration of foreign-affairs power from the PRC state system to the Communist Party (i.e., the party chief) and, accordingly, to the COFA on behalf of the CCP to coordinate a transfinite diplomatic strategy that goes beyond Western-centric international norms to manage foreign relations.

As China has profoundly embraced globalization and become deeply involved in international affairs, PRC diplomacy has become a rather unique phenomenon from the international-relations perspectives rooted in Western traditions. One obvious such indicator is that today the foreign minister of China is not the PRC’s chief diplomat, and, accordingly, the Foreign Ministry is not the government office in overall charge of foreign affairs. Instead, there is an office called the Zhongyang waiban (中央外办) that works as an umbrella organization under which the Foreign Ministry operates. The name of the office is translated into English as the Central Office of Foreign Affairs (COFA); it is the office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (中央外事委员会).<sup>1</sup>

What exactly is the Zhongyang waiban? More specifically, why does such a Foreign Affairs Commission of the CCP Central Committee exist? How has it come about that the COFA has come to be different from but superior to the PRC Foreign Ministry? What is the institutional position of the COFA within the Chinese party-state system, and what is its responsibility in PRC foreign relations? More importantly, what does such an institutional arrangement in the CCP’s management of foreign policy imply for China’s international relations?

By briefly exploring the answers to the above questions, this essay uses the COFA as an institutional window to peer into the inner operations of China’s foreign conduct. The preliminary answers presented below will reveal that foreign policy in China is an area over which the CCP takes command, while the PRC state is a white-glove organization of the CCP in the governance of this domain, just as the PRC is a white-glove organization of every domain of state administration in China. In particular, since the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown the COFA, an informal institution, has carried out secret diplomacy with Western governments, especially the United States, against democratic pressures those governments faced in making deals with

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201805/15/WS5afacfd2a3103f6866ee8868.html>, accessed May 15, 2018.

China, thus increasing the trend whereby the personal dictatorship of the CCP chief contributes much to the COFA's growing power (in contrast to the power of the formal state agencies involved in foreign relations). As China has become determined to compete for domination of the global order, the COFA has become a crucial institutional tool to manage those aspects of foreign relations that are now driven by the CCP to achieve realization of the "China dream" in which China will "return to the central stage of the world." Under the current leadership of Xi Jinping (习近平), the COFA serves as the institutional lynchpin in China's transfinite diplomatic conduct of what is called "greater diplomacy" (大外事).

### **The Institutional Evolution of the COFA: Leadership Politics as the Momentum**

The COFA has existed for forty years, but since its creation in 1981, its power had been relatively weak within the huge Chinese party-state until the recent decade. In February 1981, Premier Zhao Ziyang (赵紫阳), who took office in 1980, nominated his CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) colleague Li Xiannian (李先念) to be in charge of foreign relations. Although Li would later, in June 1983, become PRC president, in 1981 he did not hold any state position. As a result, a Central Leading Small Group on Foreign-Affairs Work (中央外事工作领导小组) was established, with Li as its head and veteran diplomat Vice Premier of the State Council Ji Pengfei (姬鹏飞) in charge of daily work of the group.<sup>2</sup> Ji then organized an office for the group, the Foreign Affairs Office of the State Council (国务院外事办公室, or FAO), an early incarnation of what would later become the COFA.

Throughout the 1980s, the FAO was small in size, and its ranking was never greater than, or even equal to, that of the Foreign Ministry. In 1982 both Ji Pengfei and Foreign Minister Huang Hua became state councillors, positions with equal rank but with less prestige than that of a vice premier.<sup>3</sup> At that time, the role of the FAO was to provide advice on foreign affairs to the top leaders, especially to Li Xiannian.

Soon after Wu Xueqian (吴学谦) succeeded Huang Hua as foreign minister in November 1982, he also became a state councillor and a CCP Politburo member,<sup>4</sup> with a leadership ranking higher than that of either Ji Pengfei or Huang Hua. At that time, and continuing into the late 1980s and under the leadership of Jiang Zemin (江泽民), when Foreign Minister Qian Qichen (钱其琛) held a seat on the Politburo and his successor Tang Jiaxuan (唐家璇) was a state councillor, the ranking of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was always higher than that of the FAO, with the

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<sup>2</sup> 《李先念传》编写组、鄂豫边区革命史编辑部编,《李先念年谱》,北京:中央文献出版社,2011, vol. 6, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> For biographical information on Ji and Huang, see 中共中央组织部、中共中央党史研究室编,《中国共产党历届中央委员大辞典,1921-2003》,北京:中共党史出版社,2004, p. 256, 231.

<sup>4</sup> 外交部网站,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/wjrw\\_674925/2166\\_674931/t445861.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/wjrw_674925/2166_674931/t445861.shtml), accessed July 26, 2021.

director of the FAO holding a rank of deputy minister (in the cases of both Liu Shuqing [刘述卿]<sup>5</sup> and Liu Huaqiu [刘华秋]).<sup>6</sup>

In fact, it is relatively meaningless to talk about rankings at that time because the Foreign Ministry was in overall charge of foreign conduct and the FAO was not involved in first-hand diplomatic practice. But this division of labor began to change following the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown when the Chinese leadership sought to engage in secret diplomacy with the White House. It became more convenient at that time for the FAO, rather than the Foreign Ministry, a formal state organization that had to maintain a certain level of transparency with international public opinion, to engage in such activities. During those years of secret Sino-U.S. diplomacy, Chinese diplomat Liu Huaqiu, deputy foreign minister also who held a position at the FAO, emerged as a secret liaison with the George W.H. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations. As a result of his success as secret liaison, Liu was in 1994 promoted to the position of director of the FAO while, concurrently, the position of deputy foreign minister. It was during this period that the FAO became increasingly involved in China's first-hand diplomatic conduct, though the Foreign Ministry remained at the center of overall foreign affairs.

In 1998, after thoroughly consolidating power following the death of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin dismantled the FAO under the State Council, but resurrected it as the Central Office of Foreign Affairs, with professional diplomat Liu Huaqiu, who held full ministerial rank, as its first director. This started the process of concentrating foreign-affairs power in the hands of the CCP party system rather than the PRC state system.

However, due to Jiang Zemin's continued influence, despite his retirement, it was difficult for Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), who took office as CCP party chief and PRC president in 2002–3, to dominate China's foreign affairs in general and to control the Foreign Ministry in particular. For remedying the handicaps, Hu initially brought in Dai Bingguo (戴秉国), a veteran diplomat but who had been relatively marginalized during the Jiang era, from the International Department of the CCP Central Committee (中共中央对外联络部, or 中联部, formerly translated as the Department of Foreign Liaisons), as no. 2 leader of the Foreign Ministry, and later, following Jiang's full retirement from his last official post as chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), in 2005, as director of the COFA (while retaining his post in the Foreign Ministry to serve as a check over Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing (李肇星)).<sup>7</sup> In 2007, after Hu entered his second term, Dai was promoted to the position of state councillor, for the first time making the position of director of the COFA superior in ranking to that of foreign minister. With these new

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<sup>5</sup> 外交部网站,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/wjrw\\_674925/lrfbjbzsl\\_674933/t9079.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/wjrw_674925/lrfbjbzsl_674933/t9079.shtml), accessed July 26, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> 外交部网站,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/wjrw\\_674925/lrfbjbzsl\\_674933/t9078.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/wjrw_674925/lrfbjbzsl_674933/t9078.shtml), accessed July 26, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> 外交部网站,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/wjrw\\_674925/lrfbjbzsl\\_674933/t9062.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/wjrw_674925/lrfbjbzsl_674933/t9062.shtml), accessed July 26, 2021.

personnel arrangements, Dai Bingguo, rather than Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, would play the role of no.1 diplomat throughout the Hu Jintao era. Accordingly, the overall power of the COFA increased, but not to the point of actually replacing the power of the Foreign Ministry.

### **“Restructuring the Foreign-Affairs Leadership System”: Xi Jinping’s Program to Dominate Diplomacy**

The COFA’s overwhelming replacement of the Foreign Ministry as the institutional lynchpin of China’s foreign affairs took place after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012–13. In 2013 during Xi’s first reorganization of PRC state leadership, former Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪), in his capacity as state councillor, was appointed director of the COFA, a bureaucratic ranking higher than that of the new foreign minister, Wang Yi (王毅). Five years later, when Wang Yi was promoted to the position of state councillor, while retaining his position of foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, as director of the COFA, was promoted to the position of Politburo member, ranking higher in the hierarchy than all non-Politburo state leaders.

Also in 2018, when Xi Jinping began his second term as PRC president (without any term limit due to a constitutional amendment), Xi restructured the central decision-making system by creating some new commissions and upgrading some existing Leading Small Groups under the CCP Central Committee. Among such organizational changes, the Central Leading Small Group on Foreign-Affairs Work became the Foreign Affairs Commission of the CCP Central Committee, with Xi Jinping as chairman, and the COFA became the Office of the Commission, rather than the Office of the former Leading Small Group, with Yang Jiechi remaining as its director.<sup>8</sup>

These moves represented a major accomplishment in terms of Xi’s moves to concentrate foreign-affairs power in his own hands. During his first term (from 2012/13 to 2017/18), Xi duplicated some of Hu’s foreign-policy moves but also supplemented them with strong strategic moves to reshape the foreign-affairs organizational structure, including:

-- Heavily relying on the COFA in the conduct of foreign relations, while, at the same time, appointing some of his own protégées, such as Song Tao (宋涛) as a major leader in the office. Song’s career had begun in Xi’s powerbase of Fujian (福建), but he joined the diplomats in the early twenty-first century and was quickly promoted within the Foreign Ministry after Xi joined the Politburo Standing Committee in 2007 to be charge of party affairs. Song Tao was then transferred to the COFA as a deputy director in 2013 and as executive deputy director with the rank of full minister in 2014.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “杨洁篪接棒中共中央外办主任,” 《东方早报》, 2013年8月26日; “中央外事工作委会领导层出炉” 《澎湃新闻》, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_2131634](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2131634), accessed May 15, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> 中共中央对外联络部网站, [https://www.idcpc.gov.cn/zlbj/bld/201912/t20191220\\_121886.html](https://www.idcpc.gov.cn/zlbj/bld/201912/t20191220_121886.html), accessed July 25, 2021.

-- Assigning the International Department of the CCP Central Committee more important tasks in China's foreign conduct, raising the importance of the party organization to almost that of the Foreign Ministry in the state system. This had already begun under Hu Jintao, but Xi had an advantage in this regard that Hu Jintao lacked: Xi's political career had started as secretary to General Geng Biao (耿飚), who in the 1970s had served as director of the Department of Foreign Liaisons (the former English name of the current International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party).<sup>10</sup>

-- Sending his protégée, Qi Yu (齐玉) from the CCP Organization Department to the Foreign Ministry in 2019 to be party secretary of the Ministry.<sup>11</sup> A total outsider in the field of diplomacy, Qi was originally from Shaanxi (陕西), Xi's home province, and it is rumored that he is a relative of Xi's mother. Because the party manages personnel issues in China, Qi's appointment as no. 2 leader in the Foreign Ministry strengthens Xi's control over China's diplomats.

It is interesting to compare the career tracks of Song Tao and Qi Yu to that of Dai Bingguo as it reveals something about China's leadership politics with respect to foreign affairs. When Hu Jintao began his terms of office, as noted above, the director of the International Department of the CCP Central Committee, Dai Bingguo, was first sent to the Foreign Ministry as party secretary and then he was promoted to the position of director of the COFA. In an opposite career move, in 2015 Song Tao was appointed director of the International Department of the CCP Central Committee from his position as no. 2 in the COFA,<sup>12</sup> whereas, in his second term, Xi found Qi Yu to be suitable to serve as party secretary in the Foreign Ministry. The job tracks of each of these senior party cadres are different, but the rationale behind the top leader's strategy of moving them around was the same: to increase the importance of CCP organizations (including the COFA and the International Department) with respect to foreign affairs in order to balance the state foreign-affairs organizations and, eventually, to actualize the party chief's control over the entire party-state foreign-affairs machine.

In fact, both Dai Bingguo and Song Tao, as well the International Department of the CCP Central Committee, attracted attention for their management of China's relationship with North Korea (though during different historical periods),<sup>13</sup> and their so-claimed accomplishments in

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<sup>10</sup> 外交部网站,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/wjrw\\_674925/lrfbzjbzzl\\_674933/t9064.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/wjrw_674925/lrfbzjbzzl_674933/t9064.shtml), accessed July 26, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> 外交部网站,

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/wjrw\\_674925/xrfbzjbzzl\\_674929/t1633562.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/wjrw_674925/xrfbzjbzzl_674929/t1633562.shtml), accessed July 26, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> “宋涛任中联部部长, 曾任中央外办常务副主任,”

<http://news.sohu.com/20151126/n428249585.shtml>, accessed July 26, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, “朝鲜领导人金正日会见胡锦涛主席特使戴秉国,”

[http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2009-09/18/content\\_1420717.htm](http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2009-09/18/content_1420717.htm); “朝鲜领导人金正日会见中国国务委员戴秉国,” <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2010-12-09/143721610455.shtml>; “习近平总书记特使

dealing with Pyongyang gained them the necessary credit for their career promotions. Dai also became well-known in international society for his declaration that the interests of the Communist regime are the core of China's national interests, requiring respect from all other countries in their relations with China.<sup>14</sup>

These facts show that since Tiananmen in 1989, the CCP has increasingly highlighted and attached a higher role to its own institutions, power, and interests than that of the institutions, power, and interests of the PRC state, despite of the fact that the CCP is the single, forever ruling party of the PRC.

That was precisely Xi Jinping's emphasis after he successfully restructured the central foreign-affairs leadership system in 2018 and made the Central Commission on Foreign Affairs, and its office, the COFA, the decision-making center of China's foreign affairs. The Fourth Plenary Session of the Nineteenth CCP Central Committee, held in October 2019, announced, unprecedentedly at least from during most of the Mao era, that "great power of diplomacy rests in the hands of the Party Center" (外交大权在党中央) and that "the party is in charge of the overall situation in foreign affairs."<sup>15</sup>

With these moves and, at the same time, with the leading PRC diplomats from the Jiang Zemin era, including Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi, choosing to entirely accept Xi Jinping's supreme authority, it seems that the internal power dynamics driving the emergence of the COFA began to wane. But with new policy considerations, the COFA is playing an increasingly central role in China's foreign conduct. Personnel maneuvering of diplomats may continue, but they will not critically affect Xi's power. Rather, as the so-called "reform of the leadership system of diplomatic work" (外事工作领导体制改革) is moving deeper into all institutional cells of the party-state<sup>16</sup> and as the program of "greater diplomacy" is guiding China's foreign conduct, the role of the COFA is becoming increasingly significant.

### **"Greater Diplomacy": China's Transfinite Foreign Conduct Beyond the Domain of the State**

Xi Jinping is unquestionably an ambitious leader, and one of his major political ambitions is in the field of China's relations with the outside world, the goal of which, as he himself declared, is

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宋涛访问朝鲜通报中共十九大情况," <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1121/c117005-29658924.html>. All accessed July 26, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Dai Bingguo stated this in a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton on July 28, 2009. See <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/news/2009/07-29/1794984.shtml>, accessed July 29, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> See an analysis of the plenary session in Guoguang Wu, "From the CCP Dilemma to the Xi Jinping Dilemma: The Chinese Regime's Capacity for Governance," *China Leadership Monitor*, March 1, 2020, <https://www.prclleader.org/guoguang-wu>, accessed August 14, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> This was announced in February 2017. See "习近平主持召开中央全面深化改革领导小组第三十二次会议," [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/06/c\\_1120420090.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/06/c_1120420090.htm), accessed February 6, 2017.

to return China “back to the central position on the world stage.”<sup>17</sup> For this purpose, the program of “greater diplomacy” was proposed in 2016,<sup>18</sup> and, after the 2018 reorganization of the central leadership system on foreign affairs, the program was promoted even more vigorously. Based on the available information, the program of “greater diplomacy” requires that the COFA play a pivotal role in the conduct foreign relations.

“Greater diplomacy” (大外交), or “greater foreign affairs” (大外事), must not be confused with “great power diplomacy” (大国外交). The latter was proposed by the Jiang Zemin leadership for highlighting China’s unusual attention to its relations with global powers, especially with the United States. “Greater diplomacy,” however, is a new program suggested by Xi Jinping that emphasizes that foreign affairs of China should not be confined as work of professional diplomats. Based on classic state and international-relations concepts, diplomacy is state business regardless of the political characteristics of the state. This takes place across regime types, both democratic and non-democratic. Though people-to-people diplomacy has surged in the recent decades with the rise of NGOs and other global, international, and transnational factors, it is usually difficult for the state to coordinate and manage, let alone dominate, such cross-country societal activities for state purposes. That is to say, in political science jargon, the state-society divide applies also to foreign relations.

China’s “greater diplomacy” differs from the above conceptualization of diplomacy in at least three respects: First, non-state actors are mobilized for foreign conduct; second, the party-state, particularly the Communist Party (as was declared in 2019) dominates and even controls all diplomatic conduct, including non-state foreign conduct; third, it accordingly covers non-state domains. This broad-reaching program of “greater diplomacy” demands huge coordination work across numerous organizations and fields. It is the COFA that assumes responsibility for such a complicated coordinating role.

The COFA thus plays a critical role in organizing China’s foreign conduct beyond the traditional state domain to actualize Xi’s “China dream” in which China stands at the center of the world. From both organizational and managerial perspectives, the COFA works as the general staff department in China’s transfinite “warfare” to achieve global dominance, with the Central Commission on Foreign Affairs as the headquarters. According to this line of reasoning, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs serves as the regular army of the PRC in international relations, but the other irregular and diverse forces are hugely important.

For the purpose of analysis, such coordination covers at least four major areas. First, the COFA on behalf of the Party Center coordinates the party-state system to engage in Chinese foreign

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, “自信地迈向世界舞台中央: 中国特色大国外交亮点纷呈,” 中国共产党新闻网, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0831/c40531-29506441.html>, accessed August 31, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Preliminary research finds that the term 大外事 possibly first appeared in June 2016, in a speech delivered by Xu Shousheng, then CCP secretary of Hunan province. Xu also pointed out at this time that this was Xi Jinping’s idea about foreign affairs. “徐守盛：以大外事推动大开放促进大发展,” <http://www.411100.cn/m/view.php?aid=93>, accessed July 31, 2021.

relations. As we know, parts of China's huge party-state system have become increasingly involved in international connections. In the state system, aside from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are many other administrative offices engaging in such activities, including primarily the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the non-administrative branches of the state, such the People's Congress system, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the courts, and so forth also have foreign connections. It is the COFA of the CCP that must coordinate these numerous parts of the party-state system involved in foreign affairs, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not able to do so. Additionally, the CCP has its own organizational system, with many offices also having a relevance to China's external relations. Let us name just a few: the Taiwan Affairs Office, the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, the International Department, the Department of the United Front (统战部), and the Department of Publicity (formerly the Department of Propaganda, or 中共中央宣传部), and especially its component in charge of "greater international propaganda" (大外宣). This is to say nothing of the military forces, including the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Armed Police. In China's party-state system, it is difficult for the State Council, of which the Foreign Ministry is a part, to manage the foreign conduct of China's armed forces, but as the party takes command of the military, so does the COFA take command of the military's foreign conduct.

In the second area, there are numerous "white-glove" party-state organizations dealing with foreign relations, such as the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (中国人民外交学会) and the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (中国国际贸易促进委员会, or 贸促会). They are all unequivocally included in the so-called "new framework for greater diplomacy," as, for example, highlighted by Jiang Zengwei (姜增伟), a former deputy minister of Commerce and currently CCP secretary and president of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, in his speech at the Council's 2017 meeting on foreign affairs.<sup>20</sup> This is a huge gray area where the Communist Party's organizational system assumes a leadership role, with foreign relations under the guidance of the COFA.

The third area of "greater diplomacy," and one to which Xi Jinping pays great attention, consists of local party-states. In his speech to the first meeting of the Central Commission on Foreign Affairs held in May 2018, Xi urged local party-states to grasp foreign-affairs work and to "fully build up the grassroots system and the mechanism of diplomatic work" (完善基层外事工作体

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the meeting in Anhui province held for this purpose, in "省外办召开《安徽外事侨务港澳工作“十三五”发展规划》评审会,"

<https://ahfao.ah.gov.cn/public/21741/110405031.html>, accessed July 31, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> "2017年贸促会外事工作会议在京召开,"

<http://www.ccpitdd.org/cn/xwdt/whdt/C9F32017364820.html>, accessed July 29, 2021.

制机制).<sup>21</sup> Thereafter, news reports have indicated that party committees at various levels, from the province to the county, have made efforts to implement Xi's May 2018 instructions.<sup>22</sup>

The fourth area consists of those non-state actors, including market actors, such as enterprises; cultural and educational institutions, such as schools, universities, research institutes, and art-performance troupes; NGOs; and many societal elements. Due to globalization, these organizations are increasingly involved in foreign conduct as part of CCP-PRC global strategy, yet they are all under CCP, i.e., the COFA, supervision. As such, China's foreign conduct is transfinite by nature, meaning that it intentionally and institutionally goes beyond the domains of the modern state as defined in classic Western political concepts.

## Concluding Remarks

This essay has presented a preliminary analysis of China's Central Office of Foreign Affairs, which serves as the institutional lynchpin around which China's foreign conduct has evolved in recent decades, especially under the Xi Jinping's program of so-called "greater diplomacy." A brief history of the COFA and its institutional predecessor, the FAO of the State Council, reveals a continuing trend of concentrating power in the arena of Chinese foreign policy to the CCP and, accordingly, to the CCP party chief. Along with this concentration of power, power of the COFA has gradually grown within the party-state hierarchy, from a rank lower than that of the Foreign Ministry to one higher than that of the Foreign Ministry, eventually becoming the organizational pivot of the Chinese party-system in foreign affairs that it is today. As space is limited, this essay does not fully present evidence for this conclusion, but the following simple but direct and explicit indicator goes a long way in confirming such a conclusion. Under Jiang Zemin's leadership, the FAO director was initially a deputy foreign minister, but he then ended his career as a minister; during the Hu Jintao era, the person who assumed the position of director of the FAO was concurrently a state councillor, equal in rank to a vice premier; however, during the Xi Jinping years, the FAO director has been a member of the CCP Politburo, the most powerful decision-making body in the country.

This increasing significance of the COFA in the party-state system was initially driven by the internal dynamics of China's leadership politics, from the post-Tiananmen era through the two

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<sup>21</sup> “习近平主持召开中央外事工作委员会第一次会议,”

[http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2018-05/15/c\\_1122836914.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2018-05/15/c_1122836914.htm), accessed July 29, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> For example, at the provincial level the municipality of Chongqing (重庆市) did this in March 2018 (see [http://zfwb.cq.gov.cn/djgz/jggz/201912/t20191215\\_1307845\\_wap.html](http://zfwb.cq.gov.cn/djgz/jggz/201912/t20191215_1307845_wap.html), accessed July 22–29, 2021); at the city level, there are such reports for Yuncheng (运城) city in Shanxi (山西) province ([http://www.sxycrb.com/m/content\\_212302.html](http://www.sxycrb.com/m/content_212302.html), accessed July 22–29, 2021 and Qiyang (庆阳) city in Gansu (甘肃) province (“庆阳市委外事工作委员会第三次全体会议召开,” <http://wsb.gansu.gov.cn/wsb/c108885/202107/1650277.shtml>, accessed July 22–29, 2021); an example of a county doing this is Linyi (临猗) county under Yuncheng city. See “于鹏飞主持召开中共临猗县委外事委员会第三次会议,” <http://www.sxly.gov.cn/doc/2021/07/20/394459.shtml>, accessed July 22–29, 2021.

rounds of a power transfer for the supreme position: first, from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, then, from Hu to Xi Jinping. In the process, the initially weaker leader accelerated the concentration of power in his own hands, including the power to dominate foreign affairs. At the latest stage, however, when Xi Jinping began to “reform the leadership system of China’s foreign affairs,” the rise of COFA within the Chinese party-state hierarchy has profound global implications, among which the shaping of “greater diplomacy” is extremely important. The COFA, as the institutional lynchpin of the CCP-PRC party-state system in mobilizing, coordinating, and all-round managing of all possible resources of the party-state system, plays an important role in conducting “greater diplomacy.” In this role, the COFA manages the huge irregular army of nonprofessional diplomats and the regular army of professional diplomats (the later through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Thus, it is unwise to analyze China’s foreign conduct from a Western diplomatic perspective due to the existence in China of a single party ruling over the state, penetrating into state operations, and comprehensively dominating and coordinating rule, governance, and international relations between state and non-state elements. The leadership under Xi Jinping is currently taking advantage of this powerful aspect of CCP rule to engage in a “people’s war” (人民战争) against any enemies who dare to block the CCP-PRC’s dream of “returning to the central position on the world stage.” In this sense, the COFA is also an institutional sign of Xi’s transfinite program of “greater diplomacy.”

### **About the Contributor**

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