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China's New Small Leading Group on Cybersecurity and Internet Management

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On the news tonight, China announced the first meeting of a [leading group on Internet security and informatization](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-02/27/c_133148273.htm) (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-02/27/c_133148273.htm). The group is chaired by President Xi Jinping; Premier Li Keqiang and Liu Yunshan, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau and the Director of the Propaganda Department, are the group's deputies. There have been reports of a leading small group on cyber issues meeting in the past, but no reports of public meetings for at least four years, so the announcement of this new group is a big deal.

You wouldn't know that from the official reports on the meeting. They cover well-trod ground. The Internet is critical to China's economic development, national security, and the management of public opinion. Without good security, all of these things are threatened. China is one of the biggest victims of cyber attacks, and, like Russia, Germany, and the United States, it must develop a national cybersecurity strategy. There is a great deal about indigenous innovation, the need for greater research and training of new talent, and efforts to promote Chinese technology companies. Nothing in the news stories suggest that the recent pressure on Western technology companies will get worse, but nothing suggests it will get better either.

But a group at this level signals a high level of concern and interest. What motivated the formation of the group? First, there has been a growing chorus that China needed to better coordinate its Internet security policies. From the outside we tend to see the Chinese policy process as strategic and driven from the center, but in fact it is highly contested and fragmented. At least six different agencies and ministries—the Ministry of Public Security, State Encryption Bureau, State Secrets Bureau, Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and People's Liberation Army—have input into cybersecurity policy. The announcement of the small group raises the issue much higher on the policy agenda, and energizes it with top leadership attention. It also means that stand-offs between competing groups can be resolved and policy moved forward.



Second, while the Snowden revelations really stalled U.S. efforts to pressure China on cyber economic espionage, the international environment is rapidly changing. Countries like Japan and Korea are developing new offensive and defensive cyber capabilities. Brazil is hosting an international conference on Internet governance and the European Commission has called for "concrete and actionable steps" to globalize essential Internet functions. Beijing is worried that it must do more to promote its vision to the outside world of how cyberspace should be managed.

Third, there are leadership politics involved. Xi Jinping has not been shy about consolidating power at the top. We will, of course, have to wait and see how the leading group develops. But this is another high profile issue Xi seems determined to put a stamp on as he tries to make China a "strong network country."

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