

Li Keqiang 李克强

Born 1955



Current Positions

- Premier of the State Council (2013–present)
- Member of the 19th Politburo Standing Committee (2007–present)
- Vice Chairman of the National Security Committee (2013–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Comprehensive Reform Committee (2013–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission of the CCP Central Committee (2013–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Foreign Affairs Committee (2013–present)
- Vice Chairman of the Central Military and Civilian Integration Development Committee (2017–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Committee for Comprehensive Ruling by Law (2018–present)
- Deputy Head of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Committee (2014–present)
- Chairman of the Committee on Organizational Structure of the Central Committee of the CCP (2012–present)
- Chairman of the National Defense Mobilization Committee (2013–present)
- Director of the State Energy Commission (2013–present)
- Head of the National Leading Group for Climate Change and for Energy Conservation and Reduction of Pollution Discharge (2013–present)
- Head of the State Council Leading Group for Rejuvenating the Northeast Region and Other Old Industrial Bases (2013–present)
- Head of the State Council Leading Group for Western Regional Development (2013–present)
- Head of the State Council Three Gorges Project Construction Committee (2008–present)
- Head of the State Council South-to-North Water Diversion Project Construction Committee (2008–present)
- Head of the State Council Leading Group for Deepening Medical and Health System Reform (2008–present)
- Head of the National Science and Technology Leading Group (2018–present)
- Head of the Central Leading Group for Covid-19 Outbreak Response (2020–present)
- Member of the Politburo (2007–present)
- Full member of the Central Committee of the CCP (1997–present)

Personal and Professional Background

Li Keqiang was born on July 1, 1955, in Dingyuan County, Anhui Province. Li joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1976. He was a “sent-down youth” at an agricultural commune in Fengyang County, Anhui (1974–76).¹ He served as party secretary of a production brigade in the county (1976–78). Li received a bachelor’s degree in law (1978–82) and a doctoral degree in economics (via part-time studies, 1988–94) from Peking University. As an undergraduate majoring in law, Li studied under Professor Gong Xiangrui, a well-known, British-educated expert on Western political and administrative systems. Li and his classmates translated important legal works from English into Chinese, including Lord Denning’s *The Due Process of Law and A History of the British Constitution*.² As a Ph.D. student in economics, Li studied under Li Yining, a well-known economist whose theories have been instrumental in guiding China’s state-owned enterprise reform.

Li advanced his early career primarily through the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL), serving as secretary of the CCYL Committee at Peking University (1982–83). Within the Secretariat of the CCYL Central Committee, Li served as alternate member (1983–85), secretary (1985–93), and first secretary (1993–98). In 1998, Li was transferred to Henan Province, where he served as governor (1998–2003) and, concurrently, deputy party secretary (1998–2002) and then party secretary (2002–04). Li then served as party secretary of Liaoning Province (2004–07). In October 2007, he was promoted to be a member of the Politburo Standing Committee (2007–present) and, shortly thereafter, served as executive vice premier of the State Council (2008–13). He was first elected to the Central Committee as a full member at the 15th Party Congress in 1997. Li remained on the Politburo Standing Committee after the 19th Party Congress and retained his premiership for a second term at the 13th National People’s Congress in March 2018.

Family and Patron-Client Ties

Li comes from a mid-level official family. His father, Li Fengsan, was a county-level cadre in Fengyang County, Anhui Province.³ Li’s wife, Cheng Hong, was an English language and literature professor at the Capital University of Economics and Business in Beijing. She received her undergraduate degree in English at the PLA Foreign Language Institute in Luoyang and her doctoral degree in literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Science. She was a visiting scholar at Brown University in the mid-1990s. Li’s father-in-law, Cheng Jinrui, served as deputy secretary of the Henan Provincial CCYL Committee. Li’s mother-in-law, Liu Yiqing, was a journalist at the Xinhua News Agency. Li Keqiang and Cheng Hong have one daughter, who received her undergraduate degree from Peking University and later studied in the United States, according to some unverified sources.

Li is widely considered to be a protégé of Hu Jintao. Li began working in the CCYL Central Committee at the end of 1982, precisely when Hu Jintao became secretary of the CCYL. Li Keqiang worked closely with Hu, assisting him in convening the Sixth National Conference of the All-China Youth Federation in August 1983. Having been nominated by Hu, Li was promoted to alternate member of the CCYL Secretariat three months later. When Hu was made first secretary of the CCYL in 1985, Li became a full member of the Secretariat. For most of the Hu era, Li was seen as a possible successor to his mentor.

Policy Preferences and Political Prospects

Compared to his two predecessors, Premier Zhu Rongji and Premier Wen Jiabao, Li Keqiang’s power and authority have been noticeably limited — even on economic policy, which has traditionally fallen under the purview of the premier. Observers argue that Premier Li has been marginalized, as Xi has taken over all of the top posts in economic affairs.⁴ Nevertheless, in his first term as premier, Li promoted a number of policy priorities. These included township-centered urbanization, affordable housing, employment, food security, public health care, clean energy technology, and the reduction of bureaucratic barriers for private sector development. Li has also often addressed the issue of economic disparity, especially the large low-income population in the country despite the growth of the Chinese middle class.⁵

In particular, Li has frequently called for “mass entrepreneurship and innovation.” This policy has been credited with China’s technological development for almost a decade, as evidenced by the vitality of China’s e-commerce and e-payment systems. His township-centered urbanization, however, was regarded by Xi’s economic team as neither desirable (due to its resulting resource inefficiency and widespread pollution) nor feasible (because young people are less interested in staying in small towns) and thus was largely replaced by a development strategy focused on large urban clusters.

At a time when Xi enjoys tremendous individual power, Li can potentially be viewed as a balancing force within the political establishment — though not an impressive one thus far. In March 2022, Li confirmed that this would be his last year serving as premier. Li could remain a Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) member at the 20th Party Congress; however, he may step down from the PSC this October and retire from his government position next March, as did his predecessors Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao.

Compiled by Cheng Li and the staff of the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings

Notes:

¹ “Sent-down youth” (插队知青) refers to young, educated urbanites who left their home cities to serve as manual laborers in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

² Li Meng, “Li Keqiang and the class of ’77 at the Department of Law at Peking University” [李克强所在的北大法律系77级], *Democracy and Law* [民主与法制], October 26, 2009.

³ For more information about Li Keqiang’s family background and his early experiences, see Hong Qing 洪清, *He will be China’s Top Manager: The Biography of Li Keqiang* [他将是 中国大管家—李克强传] (New York: Mirror Books, 2010).

⁴ Jeremy Page, Bob Davis, and Lingling Wei, “Xi Weakens Role of Beijing’s No. 2,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 2013.

⁵ “Premier Li Keqiang attended the press conference and answered questions from Chinese and foreign journalists.” [李克强总理出席记者会并回答中外记者提问]. Xinhua News Agency, May 29, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-05/29/c_1126047196.htm.