

#27 The Chinese Police Organisation at Home and Abroad

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Key Takeaways

- The Ministry of Public Security is a powerful and highly diversified organization with a wide range of interests and activities.
- Centralization of Chinese policing is nevertheless incomplete, due to resource constraints and shared control with local governments.
- Stability maintenance remains a chief priority of Chinese police in addition to other areas of crime fighting and counterterrorism efforts.
- Under President Xi Jinping, the frequency and types of overseas police involvement have grown. Police engagement is particularly active in INTERPOL and SCO.
- The Chinese government and related police authorities are actively forming bilateral police connections such as training cooperation, and, where interests and needs align, more routine engagement such as joint patrols, establishment of hotlines for Chinese nationals, and police cooperation centers.

Conclusions

1. South Africa: claims of police service stations beyond the established community centers has not been addressed publicly by the government, and friendly bilateral police relations have resumed in the post-pandemic environment.
2. Italy: government officials have ceased bilateral policy engagement and launched an investigation into the report of service stations in four countries.
3. United States: officials have made arrests and brought charges against MPS officials, leading to an escalation of criticism on both sides and further problems for U.S. China relations.

Executive Summary

This brief provides an overview of the Chinese policing system from its organization and functions at home to the recent expansion of policing activities abroad. Efforts of Chinese police to build connections in foreign countries have been growing for decades, but the issue reached peak salience in the Netherlands in 2022 when local news media reported that Chinese “police service stations” were operating on Dutch soil. That fall, news organizations around the world pursued stories that highlighted the findings of a report authored by a human rights non-governmental organization, sparking concern among some governments about the purpose and intent of the stations. In the Netherlands, a foreign ministry spokesperson publicly announced an investigation by the Dutch government.

The news also generated academic and policy interest in the overseas activities of Chinese police. A report released by the Leiden Asia Center documented Chinese government influence on diaspora members in the Netherlands and included questions about Chinese police presence overseas. The majority of respondents said they did not know about the overseas police stations prior to fall 2022, but they almost unanimously interpreted the police stations as an attempt by the Chinese government to intimidate members of the diaspora. This brief provides insight into the functions and purpose of the overseas police stations and puts these findings into perspective by delving further into the role of Chinese policing efforts in the Netherlands and abroad.

The first objective of this brief is to clarify how policing operates in China. It provides an overview of the relevant history of policing in China, highlighting broad shifts to policing needs and powers that developed during the communist transition and more recent market-oriented reforms. Another aim is to delineate the distribution of police powers, outlining the organization of policing groups under the Ministry of Public Security and noting the fractures in centralization that persist within the institution. Although overseas police service stations are linked to municipal public security bureaus, these do not operate independently within China’s centralized command structure. The brief also examines related enforcement agencies that perform complementary or overlapping functions.

Shifting to overseas activities, the brief details the parameters of Chinese police interactions abroad, including partnerships and cooperation efforts such as training, joint patrols, and crime fighting. It also describes activities at police cooperation centers and the police service stations established around the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Case studies of South Africa, Italy, and the United States illustrate how international engagement plays out in individual country settings and highlight differing approaches to engagement and responses to controversy. The brief concludes with a summary of key points and final considerations.