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16 June 2020

'AN ASSESSMENT OF THE 3rd SESSION OF CHINA'S 13th NPC – MAY 2020'

by JAYADEVA RANADE

SUMMARY

- The 3rd Plenum of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) was held in Beijing from May 22 to 28, 2020, in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic with restrictions on expenditure and social interaction.
- The state-owned CCTV sought to refurbish the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s image that had been dented by months of criticism by the people. It said (May 21) CCP members had donated 8.36 billion RMB (US\$ 1.18 billion) for the fight against the coronavirus in the past three months.
- Demonstrating that Chinese President Xi Jinping continues to closely monitor the PLA and Party to discern any signs of violations of Party discipline or wavering in political reliability, 17 NPC Deputies, including 4 senior PLA officers, were suddenly asked "to resign" on May 21, from their posts as Deputies due to "serious violations of Party discipline". The action would help Xi Jinping further tighten his grip on the Party and PLA.
- Critics of Xi Jinping and the CCP also attempted to embarrass China's leadership. At least three critics of Chinese President Xi Jinping and the CCP publicised their criticism.
- Separately, the White House released a toughly worded 16-page document titled 'The United States Strategic Approach to China' on May 20, which put the spotlight on the strained US-China relationship that has adversely impacted China's economy and realisation of its 'Two Centenary' goals.
- The Government Work Report presented by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to the NPC on May 22, praised Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping and mentioned him 13 times in the report. The Party was also given visible prominence and mentioned 29 times!
- Prominent in the Government Work Report was the failure, for the first time since 1994, to mention next year's targeted GDP growth rate. The report listed numerous concessions to commercial businesses, industry and MSMEs. It said the government will create 9 million jobs in the coming year -- a drop from last year's 11 million jobs. The very brief mention of the Belt and Road Initiative omitted any advertisement of 'great' progress. There was anticipation of a "tough struggle ahead".
- The Finance Minister's report recommended an almost 50 per cent reduction in government expenditure. This included a more than 11 per cent cut in the Foreign Affairs budget. Expenditures on national defence and national security were, however, increased.

A detailed note assessing the 3rd session of the 13th NPC plenum is appended.



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China held its 'Big Two' -- as the plenary sessions of its top advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and its version of a parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC) are called -- from May 21 to May 28, 2020. Annually held in March, the plenary sessions were delayed this year because of the Coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic's shadow was evident in the caution that the plenum would be shortened to a week instead of the usual ten days with restrictions on the number of press conferences and correspondents allowed to attend. Provision for video conferencing was, for the first time, made for those not physically attending the CPPCC and NPC Plenums.

2. Reflecting the adverse impact of the Coronavirus on China's economy, Han Fangming, Vice Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the CPPCC National Committee, set the tone for frugality. He said "Due to the COVID-19 epidemic and the shortened session, the accommodation and meeting venues for CPPCC members and NPC delegates are simpler, stricter and more efficient." Hotels and meeting rooms for the sessions provided curtailed services with fewer newspapers and no banners, red carpets, flowers, bars or cafes. CPPCC members and NPC delegates were asked to bring their own pens or notepads and just a single bottle of water, a teacup, and a pack of antiseptic wipes were provided at the venue. Each member and delegate was given a full-page reminder about how to avoid catching or block spreading the virus. 'Social distancing' was enforced and attendees were encouraged not to shake hands, congregate outside the meeting rooms or linger in confined places, as well as not to leave their hotels or the convention areas without permission from the organizers.

3. To burnish the credibility of the CCP which got dented particularly during the Coronavirus pandemic, the state-owned CCTV on the day of the 'Big Two' sessions reported (May 21), that CCP members had donated 8.36 billion RMB (US\$ 1.18 billion) for the fight against the coronavirus in the past three months. It said all the money was sent to the 'Party Central' for redistribution.

4. A surprise development intended to shore Chinese President Xi Jinping's position after the spate of personal criticism he was subjected to in the past few months, including calls for him to step down, was the announcement on May 21 that seventeen Deputies to the NPC had been asked to resign. Four among them were senior PLA officers who were charged with "serious violations of discipline and law". The list of PLA Deputies to the NPC, which was finalised on May 10, 2020, did not mention their names. Corruption, which is often listed as one of the charges, was not mentioned suggesting that doubts about their political reliability or factionalism could have been factors for their dismissal. Two of the officers, Lt. General Rao Kaixun, the former Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff of the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF) and Major General Meng Zhongkang, former Political Commissar of the Jiangsu Military District, had outstanding career records. The unexpected dismissal of the NPC Deputies confirms that Xi Jinping continues to closely monitor the PLA and the Party for any signs of factionalism or wavering in political reliability. More importantly, their dismissal would have sent a chill through PLA and Party cadres enabling Xi Jinping to further tighten his grip.

5. There were some developments, however, that were timed to coincide with the opening of the 'Big Two' on May 21 and embarrass China's leadership. Following the 'open' letter posted on WeChat on May 1, listing 15 demands, 43-year old Zhang Xuezhong, a Shanghai-based Chinese Constitutional lawyer who was subsequently detained, posted an 'open' letter addressed to all NPC Deputies on WeChat on May 9, calling for reforms and freedom of speech. Describing China's governance as very backward, he asked the NPC Deputies to create a representative committee to draft a constitution conforming to "modern political principles". He urged the NPC to pass resolutions, which enshrine that no political party should enjoy the 'status of a national public service institution'. Meanwhile, a 20-minute audio recording of retired senior Central Party School Professor Cai Xia's scathing criticism of Xi Jinping and the CCP circulated widely over the Chinese web for almost a month! This was followed by the over 2000-character essay penned by Xu Zhangrun, former Professor of Law at Beijing's

prestigious Tsinghua University and who has near iconic status among China's academics and intellectuals, advising NPC Deputies on twelve things they should do. A strident critic of Xi Jinping since 2018, banned from writing and using the social media, Xu Zhangrun had the essay published in the Hongkong magazine 'Mainland China' on May 21.

6. Xu Zhangrun blamed "The Axlerod [that is, Xi Jinping] and the cabal" for the rapid spread of the Coronavirus across the world and China's isolation globally. In addition to demanding a State Council White Paper investigating actions taken during the initial stages of the outbreak and especially between January 3 and 7, Xu Zhangrun demanded that all officials be required to publicly disclose their assets; remove Communist Party cells from all academic and educational institutions; enshrine the protection of private property in the constitution and return the right of ownership to the people themselves; and "eliminate the state-sanctioned monopoly exercised by the Communist Party as China's sole landlord". It is interesting that critics of Xi Jinping and the CCP continue to be able to post their criticisms on Chinese social media platforms.

7. Separately putting the spotlight on the strained US-China relationship, which is adversely impacting China's economy and its 'Two Centenary' goals, was the toughly worded 16-page document titled 'The United States Strategic Approach to China' and released by the White House on May 20. The document effectively restricts engagement with China as US policy. It announced "our goal is to protect United States vital national interests, as articulated in the four pillars of the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America (NSS). With this document the US Government essentially shed all pretence of cooperation and engagement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and opted for a competitive approach. It could be the prelude to tougher actions against China. Rather interesting is the comment "Our approach is not premised on determining a particular end state for China", possibly to assure the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that the American objective is not to destroy it.

8. Preparatory to the CPPCC and NPC plenums, Xinhua (May 15) reported that the Politburo met on May 15 to discuss the draft of the State Council's Government Work Report that Chinese Premier Li Keqiang would present to the third meeting of the 13th NPC. Xinhua said the meeting believed that in the past year "China's development has faced many difficult challenges", but "the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core" united all the people to overcome difficulties and complete the main goals and tasks of the year. It said the

Party Central Committee has made epidemic prevention and control a top priority. The meeting "emphasised that the current global epidemic situation and the world economic situation are still grim and complex, and the challenges facing China's development are unprecedented". It said "to do a good job in the government this year" the "strong leadership of the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core, and under the guidance of Xi Jinping's socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics in the new era" was necessary. It emphasised the importance of expanding domestic demand, achieving the goal of tackling poverty, and promoting the agricultural harvest and increasing farmers' incomes.

9. South China Morning Post (May 20) said that PLA officers were pushing for a defence budget hike of 9 per cent, or higher than the 7.5 per cent increase of last year. Separately, China's economists were debating in the run up to the Plenum whether, in view of the bleak and uncertain economic situation, the Government Work Report should at all mention a growth rate target. Items assessed as likely to figure in the Premier's report included: measures to alleviate distress caused by the pandemic, Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'Poverty Alleviation' programme, the huge problem of unemployment, and jobs for China's almost 9 million graduates. By March 2020, the number of unemployed in China had jumped to an estimated over 70-80 million from approximately 17-20 million in 2019.

10. 2,878 Deputies to the NPC, which included the 290 Deputies representing the People's Liberation Army (PLA), assembled in Beijing's Great Hall of the People from May 21 for the week-long plenary sessions. As per practice, the 2,158 CPPCC delegates were permitted to sit in the NPC meetings though not vote.

11. A day before its inaugural session on May 22, the NPC elected a 174-member presidium, with Wang Chen as Secretary General of the NPC session. The meeting also adopted the agenda for the session: Deliberate the report on the work of the government; Review the report on the implementation of the 2019 plan and on the draft plan for national economic and social development in 2020; Review the report on the execution of the central and local budgets for 2019 and on the draft central and local budgets for 2020; Deliberate the bill put forward by the NPC Standing Committee on reviewing the draft civil code; Deliberate the bill put forward by the NPC Standing Committee on reviewing a draft decision of the NPC on establishing and improving the legal system and enforcement mechanisms for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to safeguard national security; Deliberate the work report of the NPC

Standing Committee; Deliberate the work report of the Supreme People's Court; and Deliberate the work report of the Supreme People's Procuratorate.

12. China Daily pointed out that the Draft Civil Code to be deliberated on by the CPPCC and NPC consists of 7 volumes, including general provisions and sections on property, contracts, personality rights, marriage and family, inheritance and torts. Shi Jiayou, Professor at Renmin University of China and Executive Director of the National Research Centre of Civil and Commercial Law, told the state-owned China Global Television Network (CGTN) that compilation of personality rights in a separate volume is a major development and innovation in democratic legislation and the civil code. It will help deepen the legal protection of personal dignity and individual rights.

13. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang presented the draft of the Government Work Report for approval to the NPC on May 22. The Report was only 9,500 (Chinese) characters in length, or half last year's 16,000-character report. Predictably, it praised Chinese President Xi Jinping with 13 mentions of Xi Jinping and his position as "the core" of the CCP. There was no reference to Deng Xiaoping or Mao Zedong. The report stressed Party discipline and emphasised that it was the Party's "strong and courageous" leadership that had enabled China to face the difficulties. The report mentioned the Party 29 times! It was noticeably temperate in tenor, and subdued while recounting the achievements of the past year and listing tasks for the coming year. Reflecting the deleterious impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and impending uncertainty, it stated that China had promptly shared information about the outbreak of the Coronavirus. The Belt and Road Initiative received very brief mention with no mention of 'great' progress. In his draft report, Li Keqiang omitted to mention the word "peaceful" while referring to Taiwan's reunification thereby causing quite a stir. This was rectified in the final version on May 28.

14. For the first time in 26 years, the report did not set an annual economic growth target for gross domestic product (GDP) as it has since 1994. China's economists had been debating for at least the past two months whether to specify a target growth rate. Because the economic damage is far higher than officially acknowledged by China, and factors like the economic uncertainty caused by the Coronavirus and the growing anti-China sentiment that could affect China's exports, the leadership probably decided not to mention a target which it might not be able to reach. It emphasised the difficulties confronting China and extended concessions, tax

and fee cuts totalling RMB 500 billion Yuan by a year to MSMEs and industry to help them recover. It said the reduction in electricity prices by 5 per cent will be extended till the end of the year. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's report instead prioritised the goals of stabilising employment, alleviating poverty and preventing risks in 2020, but again, without mentioning the target dates as it used to in the past. He said they would create 9 million jobs in the year, a drop from the previous years' 11 million despite the huge surge in unemployment. The budget deficit is slated to rise to 3.76 trillion yuan (US\$ 529 billion) this year, 36% higher than in 2019, while the target for the deficit as a percentage of GDP will increase to "more than 3.6%" from last year's 2.8%, exceeding the 3% threshold which has long been seen by China's policymakers as a red line that must not be crossed.

15. At the press conference after the concluding session of the 13th NPC on May 28, the People's Daily (May 28) reported that Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said the government would focus its stimulus measures on domestic economics, while admitting that China is a developing country with a large population with an average annual per capita disposable income of 30,000 yuan (US\$ 4,213.30). There are 600 million people -- or 2 out of every 5 Chinese -- who have low and middle incomes, whose average monthly income is barely 1,000 yuan (US\$ 140.40). He added, "It may be difficult even to rent an apartment with income of 1,000 yuan in a medium-sized city." Li Keqiang promised to make people's livelihood a high priority. He said the task of poverty alleviation is a "sophisticated commitment" that the CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping made to the entire society and it must be completed as scheduled this year. There were originally 5 million people living in poverty. Under the impact of this epidemic some more people may have fallen back to poverty and the task of poverty alleviation has become even tougher.

16. Poverty alleviation is a top priority for Xi Jinping and he has been emphasising it during his tours outside Beijing since March 2020. The PLA too is publicising its efforts in poverty alleviation. China has 52 officially recognised 'impoverished counties' with 551,000 rural impoverished people concentrated in central and western regions. The regions refer to the Tibet Autonomous Region, four Tibetan-inhabited provinces and four prefectures in southern Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, while the three prefectures refer to Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province, Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan province and Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu province. The official poverty line in China is about US\$ 47 per month or 4,000 yuan per year and covers only about 550,000

people. The Chinese National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) later commented that most of these 600 million people are migrant workers.

17. The Finance Minister's report approved by the NPC revealed that budgetary cuts had been imposed on most government departments. Central government expenditures are down 0.2% and projected at 3.5035 trillion yuan. Highlights of a summary breakdown are: 172.176 billion yuan on general public services, down 13.3%; 54.305 billion yuan on foreign affairs, a drop of 11.8%; 1.268005 trillion yuan on national defense, up 6.6%; 183.272 billion yuan on public security, up 0.7%; 169.909 billion yuan on education, a drop of 7.5% (national spending on education, which includes local outlays, will increase by 5.4%); 319.651 billion yuan on science and technology, down 9.1% (national spending in this area, which includes local outlays, will rise by 3.1%); 121.618 billion yuan on stockpiling grain, edible oils, and other materials, up 1%; 539.943 billion yuan on debt interest payments, up 18.2%. Interesting in the 8.3915 trillion yuan to be transferred to local governments, which amount has increased by 12.8%, is a new one-time special payment of 605 billion yuan for the year. It said this is to be used for supporting local governments to ensure security in the six areas, with a focus on guaranteeing basic living standards, ensuring normal functioning of primary-level governments, developing the public health system and the emergency supply system, and responding to uncertainties in the second half of the year.

18. China's defence budget was hiked by 6.6 per cent to 1.268 trillion yuan (US\$ 178.2 billion) from last year's allocation of US\$ 177.6 billion. The low increase is due to the serious disruption to China's economy by the COVID-19. The state-run Xinhua news agency noted it is the lowest growth rate in recent years. China's Global Times (May 22) observed the 6.6 per cent rise in the defence budget was lower than the 7.5 per cent of 2019, when the defence budget was 1.19 trillion yuan. It quoted Song Zhongping, a Hongkong-based retired officer of the PLA Second Artillery and Chinese military expert and TV commentator, as saying this year's 6.6 percent is not a significant slowdown in view of the pandemic. He added, however, that 'China is facing national security threats, including those taking place very nearby to China and in non-traditional security fields. Compared to these threats, China's military expenditure was far from enough'. Wei Dongxu, a Beijing-based military analyst, told Global Times that the increased defence budget can ensure the Chinese military's major programs and key spending fields are not affected by the pandemic and will remain on schedule. Unnamed military experts quoted by Global Times said 'China has huge national defence demands, which

is a crucial factor in the military budget. In the post-pandemic period, China faces more military threats from other countries, mainly the US. With Taiwan secessionists becoming more and more rampant, reunification by force with the island of Taiwan is always on the table, adding that in this situation, increasing the defence budget must not stop'. Song Zhongping said "People should ask first, which countries are threatening China's national security in the first place? They should ask the US, they should ask India, and some other neighbouring countries and regions."

19. Interesting was the comment of the spokesman of China's Ministry of National Defense, Senior Colonel Wu Qian. He said (May 26) "China's spending is still lower than what is needed to protect the nation's sovereignty, security and development interests, as well as to carry out its international duties and fulfil the nation's development needs. It is thus reasonable and necessary to keep growing China's military spending in a moderate and stable manner." He said on the international level, there is the rise of hegemony and power politics, coupled with unilateralism, geopolitical risks and challenges to the current global security order and "The world is not that peaceful." Domestically, Wu Qian said, China is facing an ever more complex security situation as the fight against secessionist movements becomes more intensified. The pro-secession Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan is "inviting foreign powers to serve its own goals and is going further in its pursuit of separating the country." Security on Chinese soil and of Chinese investments overseas is also facing real threats.

20. During the NPC session, Chinese President Xi Jinping met the Deputies representing the PLA/PAP and from the Nei Mongol Autonomous Region. Xinhua (May 26) reported that speaking to the PLA/PAP delegations, Chinese President Xi Jinping appreciated the military's response to the coronavirus outbreak. He said the important contributions of the military "once again proved that the people's army is a heroic force that the Party and people completely trust." He pointed out that efforts to continue national defense and army construction should proceed in spite of the novel coronavirus pandemic, highlighting the need to "accelerate the preparation for battles, flexibly carry out actual-combat military training, and comprehensively raise the capabilities of our forces to carry out military missions." He said the battle against the novel coronavirus served as a barometer for the effectiveness of the military's reforms and placed new requirements for reform on the military. Xi Jinping exhorted the delegates to "complete the designated reform tasks on time" and, in response to new issues that surfaced because of the outbreak, he "emphasized resolution [of new issues] using thoughts and methods

based on reform and innovation.” Xi Jinping specifically stressed the need to improve military medical research, strengthen national defense technological innovation, and cultivate talent -- particularly through the “three-in-one” (三位一体) training system. The military should “support local economic and social development and winning the tough battle against poverty and assist local [authorities] in doing well the work of maintaining overall social stability.” Xi Jinping told the delegates to accelerate research and development of COVID-19 drugs and vaccines. According to Xinhua, Xi Jinping told them that “the world is an increasingly dangerous place” and “The epidemic has brought a profound impact on the global landscape and on China's security and development as well.” “He ordered the military to think about worst-case scenarios, scale up training and battle preparedness, promptly and effectively deal with all sorts of complex situations and resolutely safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests.” Conscious of the low rise in the national defence budget, Xi Jinping told PLA officers not to take the money for granted and that “Every penny must be well spent to produce maximum results.” In conclusion, Xi Jinping called upon various levels of the Party and government to support national defence and military construction. Among those who attended the meeting were Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice-Chairmen Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia, as well as CMC members Wei Fenghe, Li Zuocheng, Miao Hua, and Zhang Shengmin.

21. Deputies from the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) led by TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie and including China’s Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi, participated in the NPC Sessions. State Councillor and Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi, who was a Deputy to the NPC representing TAR said, “We must do our best on the anti-separatism campaign and the implementation of various measures to maintain stability, strengthen infrastructure construction of stability, make preparations for long-term struggle.” At the TAR NPC delegation’s review meeting on May 23, TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie said they should “strive to open up a new era of rapid development of Tibet and a new situation of long-term stability.” He said they must “embody absolute loyalty to General Secretary Xi Jinping and the Party Central Committee with practical actions.” TAR delegates to the NPC and CPPCC session submitted nine proposals focused on socio economic infrastructure development and ecological environment protection. Three proposals were “Suggestions on supporting operation and maintenance of heating projects in Tibet,” “Suggestions on Supporting the Construction, Operation and Maintenance of Oxygen Supply Projects in High Altitude Areas

in Tibet” and “Proposal on Increasing Investment to Support the Construction of the Tibet Desertification Control Project.” There were six proposals from individual Deputies on: (i) “supporting Lhasa to be built as the frontier central city”; (ii) “accelerating the implementation of the ecological restoration and comprehensive management of Nyangchu (Chinese: Niyang) River”; (iii) “approving the master plan of the Yarlung (Chinese: Yalong) River scenic area for boosting cultural and eco-tourism”; (iv) “further strengthening the capacity building of primary medical and health services in Tibet”; (v) “leading the high-quality development of the power industry in the” 14th Five-Year Plan,”; and (vi) “further strengthening the capacity building of primary medical and health services in Tibet.”

22. A number of Deputies made suggestions at the NPC. A few are highlighted:

i) Cao Jingyi, a Deputy to the NPC and Research Director with the PLA Navy Academy, said that her team has extensively researched and offered strategic suggestions to PLAN on its requirements for AI-based future naval warfare. She added that her team is also committed to tackling existing practical problems in upgrading corrosion prevention of naval equipment and the application of advanced materials and had undertaken more than 110 scientific research tasks and taken the lead in launching a special corrosion control project of the PLA naval equipment in 2019. They have done research on the application of new-generation materials to vessel structure and laid a solid foundation for the development and building of future naval vessels. She said "The corrosion issue has become the number one killer that triggers equipment failures and accidents, the biggest headache that pulls down combat readiness and maintenance capabilities, and the number one enemy that affects the quick reaction and strategic deployment of equipment. This issue implies lasting combat on an invisible battlefield" .

ii) Zhang Chuanwei, a Deputy to the NPC who is also chairman of Mingyang Smart Energy, a wind turbine manufacturer and clean energy integrated solution provider based in South China's Guangdong Province, proposed on May 23 that China should accelerate the pace in the adjustment of its energy structure to shape a clean energy support belt around the sea by building multiple wind power projects on the sea. He said China should build up and multiply "Three Gorges projects on the sea", which focuses on wind power in the ocean-based exclusive economic zones 12 nautical miles to 200 nautical miles in the South China, East China, Yellow and Bohai Seas.

iii) Zhao Xiaojin, Party chief of the China Academy of Space Technology (CAST) and a member of the 13th CPPCC National Committee, said (May 23) that Chinese space industry

insiders are considering using the country's upcoming space station as a facility for large-scale space-borne biology experiments in order to constantly increase China's ability to safeguard its biosecurity. He also disclosed that China plans to send two more advanced Earth observation satellites from the Gaofen satellite family in 2020, and will conduct a Mars sample return mission by around 2030, as well as a Jovian System probe mission. And

iv) China's Minister of Agriculture and Rural Affairs Han Changfu commented "I can definitely say that China will have no food crisis, with absolute grain security" stirred discussion on China's microblog platform Weibo on May 23 with some Chinese netizens saying China's grain storage could sustain the country for more than one year. Han Chanfu's comments came as many grain exporting countries around the world have stopped or reduced their exports amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

23. The China Youth Daily (May 28) reported that the final version of the Government Work Report contained 89 revisions to the version delivered by the Chinese Premier on May 22. It noted that an important addition to the Taiwan section of the report was made, namely: "Adhere to the one-China principle and promote the peaceful development of cross-strait relations on the basis of the '1992 Consensus'". It is curious that the word "peaceful" was omitted in the draft version of the Government Work Report, causing quite a stir among observers, despite the draft having been approved by the Politburo!

24. The plenary session of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) officially closed in Beijing on May 28, 2020, and Li Zhanshu, PBSC member and Chairman of the NPC Standing Committee, delivered the closing speech. At the meeting, the NPC voted to pass the Government Work Report, passed the "Civil Code", and passed the "Hong Kong version of the National Security Law". The "Hong Kong version of the National Security Law", was passed with 2878 votes, with 1 vote against and 6 abstentions. Li Zhanshu said at the meeting that the adoption of the "Hong Kong version of the National Security Law" is a major measure to implement the spirit of the Fourth Plenary Session of the Nineteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and adhere to and improve the "one country, two systems" system. It is in compliance with the Constitution and the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and includes Hong Kong compatriots and the fundamental interests of all the Chinese people. The meeting also voted to approve the implementation of the 2019 central and local budgets and the 2020 central and local budgets and approve the 2020 central budget. The meeting adopted a resolution on the work report of the Standing Committee

of the National People's Congress, a resolution on the work report of the Supreme People's Court, and a resolution on the work report of the Supreme People's Procuratorate.

25. Efforts by the authorities prior to the NPC to promote the images of the CCP and Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed to popular dissatisfaction not having abated. Fairly strident criticism of Xi Jinping and the CCP together with demands for reform still appeared on the Chinese web probably to the discomfiture of the leadership. Interesting is that criticisms of the CCP and Xi Jinping managed to get posted on China's social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo despite the intensive cybersecurity measures. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's report to the NPC frankly projected that uncertain and tough times lie ahead. It was temperate in tenor and devoid of the usual hype regarding progress on the Belt and Road Initiative, other international initiatives or China's economic successes. It hinted at the leadership's inability to provide jobs for the huge numbers of unemployed or achieve poverty alleviation targets. Li Keqiang's report praised Xi Jinping and his leadership, but at the same time hinted that China's leadership is aware that extant popular dissatisfaction could grow.

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