



5 June 2020

## **‘CHINA’S MILITARY AND THE NATIONAL PEOPLE’S CONGRESS’**

by JAYADEVA RANADE

The annual plenary meetings (May 21 -28), of China’s top political advisors who comprise the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and Deputies to the National People’s Congress – China’s version of a parliament – in Beijing, are important events that give an insight into China’s economic situation, plans for the coming year and the thinking of China’s leadership. Commonly called the ‘Big Two’, the list of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) delegates attending the event yields clues as to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership’s areas of emphasis in the military as do their discussions. The recently concluded 13<sup>th</sup> session of the 13<sup>th</sup> NPC and 3<sup>rd</sup> session of the 13<sup>th</sup> CPPCC have been no different.

2. As per practice Chinese President Xi Jinping, who is also Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and Commander-in-Chief of the PLA, met the PLA Deputies. Xinhua (May 26) reported that he appreciated the military's response to the coronavirus outbreak and 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 told them “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.” Xi Jinping also asked the military to “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.” The hike in China’s defence budget by the lowest increment in recent years of only 6.6 per cent to US\$ 178.2 billion, elicited some negative comments. Hongkong-based retired officer of the PLA Second Artillery, now renamed the PLA Rocket Force, and prolific commentator on China’s state-owned TV and

media, Song Zhongping said “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”. Global Times quoted unnamed military experts saying “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”. With this as backdrop, Xi Jinping told PLA officers not to take the money for granted and that “Every penny must be well spent to produce maximum results.” Exhibiting apparent confidence in the PLA, he asked them to accelerate research and development of COVID-19 drugs and vaccines.

3. Interesting was that through the entire week’s deliberations of the CPPCC and NPC, none of the delegates was reported by China’s official media as having made any reference to the tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China. Chinese President Xi Jinping made no reference to the tension on the LAC and neither did Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at his press conference on the sidelines of the NPC meeting on May 24. The solitary comment mentioning India was by a Hongkong-based retired officer of the PLA Second Artillery, now renamed the PLA Rocket Force, and frequent commentator on China’s state-owned TV and media like the Global Times. Commenting on China’s defence budget, Song Zhongping was quoted by Global Times (May 22) saying "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."

4. The other surprise development was the announcement on May 21 that 17 Deputies to the NPC had been asked to resign. Among them were four senior PLA officers who were ordered to resign, including as NPC deputies, due to “serious violations of discipline and law”. Investigations of the four had started earlier between August and December last year and 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 possibly doubts about their political reliability or factionalism could have been the factors for their dismissal.

5. The PLA officers are: Lt. General Rao Kaixun, the former Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff of the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF); Major General Meng Zhongkang, former

Political Commissar of the Jiangsu Military District; Major General Xu Xianghua, the former Deputy Commander of the Army in the Western Theatre Command; and Major General Ye Qing, the former Political Commissar of the Hainan Military Region.

6. At least two of them were decorated officers with good records. Lt General Rao Kuixun, born in April 1964, was an officer on the fast, upward mobile track and had received rapid promotions. He was appointed Commander of a Group Army at the age of 48, becoming the youngest Group Army commander at that time. He was honoured as an ‘excellent commanding officer of the PLA army’ in 2008. Rao Kuixun was also the first Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff of the newly formed PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF). He was ordered to resign from his post by the SSF Party Committee on July 31.

7. The second officer was Major General Meng Zhongkang. He was born in April 1961, in Zhuji, Zhejiang and studied at the X’ian Politics College. He trained at the Shijiazhuang Army Command College, Nanjing Political College Shanghai Branch and graduated from the National Defence University. In 1998, he led a team to Liaohé to fight against the floods. In 2006, he travelled with a PLA delegation on a study tour to Britain and Southeast Asian countries. At the time he resigned from service he was Political Commissar of the Jiangsu Military Region. Major General Meng Zhongkang was awarded the ‘third-class merit’ five times.

8. The remaining two officers were Major Generals Xu Xianghua and Ye Qing. Born in Haiyan in Jiangsu province in May 1965, Xu Xianghua was promoted to the rank of Major General in December 2014. Major General Ye Qing was born in August 1962, in Hebei. He has served in the 65<sup>th</sup> Group Army and as Political Commissar of the Shanxi Jinzhong Army Division and Deputy Director of the Political Department of the Shanxi Provincial Military Region. When he was asked to resign he was the Political Commissar of the Hainan Military Region.

9. The unexpected dismissal of the four Generals further 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, announcing the dismissal of the two decorated senior officers on the eve of the NPC would have sent a chill through the PLA officer cadre thereby enabling Xi Jinping to further tighten his grip on the PLA.

10. The PLA Deputies to the NPC were divided into nine panels on May 22, to discuss the Government Work Report presented to the NPC by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairmen General Xu Qiliang and General Zhang Youxia led the discussions. Gen Xu Qiliang urged the PLA's NPC deputies to actively make suggestions and respond to concerns of all the service members by focusing on national defense and military modernization and highlighting important issues concerning reform, development and stability of the nation. Addressing ideological issues, he said the CCP "Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core has won the heartfelt trust and support of the whole party and the whole army in successfully responding to a series of risk challenges, and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is moving forward with perseverance". He urged the whole army to further enhance the "four consciousnesses", strengthen the "four self-confidences", achieve the "two safeguards", implement the responsibility system of the Chairman of the military commission, and always maintain a high degree of ideological and political action with the party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission and Chairman Xi". Xu Qiliang emphasised the necessity of strengthening the fighting spirit, adhering to the 'bottom line thinking', deepening military training and preparing for war, being ready to respond to various emergencies at any time, and resolutely completing the mission of the 'new era' entrusted by the party and the people.

11. General Zhang Youxia asserted that the "hard-won major achievements in party, country, and army building since last year are fundamentally led by Chairman Xi as the party's central nucleus and the whole party's nucleus". He said "the whole army should thoroughly implement Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the army" and firmly implement the instructions of the Chairman of advancing the reform and development of army building, maintaining the 'bottom line' for security and supporting economic development, the fight against poverty, and preventing and controlling the epidemic. He repeated the call for "thoroughly eliminating the effects of Guo Boxiong, Xu Caihou, Fang Fenghui, and Zhang Yang, so that the troops can feel the new effects of the change in style".

12. Based on its interviews with PLA Deputies to the NPC on the opening day (May 21) of the NPC Plenum, the PLA Daily highlighted they had emphasised "the party's absolute leadership over the army" and said "the soul of a strong army is stronger, and the core maintenance is more firm". It said a constant theme in their comments was that the "PLA is loyal to the Party

and is always ready to go to battle”. Referring to CMC Chairman Xi Jinping they “agreed that the ship is heavy and has one helm”.

13. During the panel discussions the PLA Deputies disclosed that military strategy guidelines of the new era were being implemented in-depth and that there had been major advancements in military training and preparations, and a “comprehensive strengthening of actual combat military training”. They said the PLA is more cohesive and that morale is high. The mobilisation order for training issued by Xi Jinping for three years in a row had, they said, established a clear direction for military training and stimulated enthusiasm and creativity to intensify actual combat military training. The Deputies emphasised that ‘joint training’ and ‘confrontation’ drills were becoming the norm.

14. A sampling of the comments by the PLA Deputies to the NPC is given below:

- i) Zhang Xuefeng, Deputy Commander of the PLA Eastern Theater Command Army, who often visits the grassroots units said “achieving the party's goal of strengthening the army in the new era and building a world-class army in an all-round way will also require the leadership core to lead the helm”. He asserted that “this understanding has already been deeply rooted in people's hearts” .... And “the officers and soldiers of the army are full of deep feelings for President Xi, and maintain the core”.
- ii) Lu Lingbao, NPC Deputy from the PAP, described the report as very distinctive because it “sticks to the people-centered development thinking throughout, and it reflects the party and government’s love for the people”.
- iii) Miao Runqi, NPC Deputy representing the Air Force Command Academy, observed that the government work report had pointed out that important progress has been made in national defense and army building and that the PLA “demonstrated the excellent style of listening to the party's command, being eager to follow orders, and bravely shouldering heavy burdens during the epidemic situation”. He said this was “basically the party’s absolute leadership over the PLA”. Miao Runqi added “It is fundamentally the strong leadership of the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core, and it is fundamentally the scientific guidance of Xi Jinping's socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics in the new era”. He called for applying the spiritual achievements in the fight against the epidemic to “build the spiritual power to educate people and prepare for war”.

- iv) Liu Shilei, NPC Deputy and Researcher at the Academy of Military Sciences, said she believes that a strong army should be strong in science and technology with strong scientific talent as this would promote military reforms. Stating that reform and innovation systems are particularly conducive to the development of scientific research she recommended building a network of laboratories across the country to systematize scientific and technological forces and contribute to national construction. Liu Shilei expressed satisfaction that despite the difficulties the state will still increase its investment in scientific research, which will definitely greatly encourage the military, scientific research staff.
- v) Cao Jingyi, a Deputy to the NPC and Research Director with the PLA Navy Academy, in a recent interview, 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. She said her team 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 achieved some progress on the corrosion prevention and control front, as they have completed the comprehensive demonstration of the research on the new-generation materials' application 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".
- vi) Wang Jianguo, NPC Deputy representing the Strategic Support Force, emphasised that promoting the development of national defense science and technology innovation is an urgent task. Xi Jinping, he recalled, "often said that core technology cannot be bought and must be developed on its own". He said this must be done quickly, including building adequate talent and construction of laboratories, software, new processes, and new materials.
- vii) Yang Zheng, Commander of the Hainan Military Region, said improving the national defense mobilization system includes leadership management, the national defense mobilization organization and the command system. He said to strengthen the provincial military region system, it is important to give the reserve force system for national defense mobilization thorough practical training. Other representatives of the National Defense Mobilization System stressed the importance of "always making the military, government, and civilians unite as a rock".

- viii) Xiu Zhizhi, NPC Deputy and Political Commissar of the Chongqing Armed Police Corps, said "I am particularly encouraged" by the National Security Law for Hongkong. It is timely and of great significance. He stressed the importance of maintaining and implementing the "one country, two systems" concept.
- ix) Jiang Jianyu, NPC Deputy and Political Commissar of the Hunan Armed Police Corps, said the changes occurring today have "not been seen in a hundred years" and that "the People's Army had comprehensively and thoroughly implemented the responsibility system of the Chairman of the Military Commission" He added "The most important thing for Chairman Xi Jinping's command is to do a good job in training and preparing for war, keep an eye on strong opponents, improve core military capabilities, and always maintain a high level of alertness on the string, ensuring that the Party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Xi Jinping are able to win decisively and not insult the mission."
- x) Zhang Hongying, NPC Deputy representing the CMC Joint Staff Department, recalled the CMC work meetings in January 2019 and November 2019 when President Xi Jinping emphasized that it is necessary to focus on actual combat military training and improve the quality and level of military preparations. He had called for enhancing combat effectiveness and strengthening the thinking of combat teams. He said the conferences had prompted officers and soldiers to carry out military training and preparations throughout the year to strengthen the military, which is the key to be able to fight and win battles.
- xi) Xie Zhengyi, NPC Deputy of the PLA Army said training is now more practical and since last year mass military and cross-regional training activities, chemical training, joint special training and actual military confrontation exercises had improved the army's military preparations.
- xii) Zang Jihui, NPC Deputy and Political Commissar of the PLA Northern Theatre Command commented that equipment upgrade and transformation is at a critical stage and that mechanization will be basically achieved by 2020. He said significant progress will be made in building 'informationisation' and strategic capabilities.
- xiii) Wu Changde, member of the CPPCC and former Deputy Director of the CMC Political Work Department, emphasised that job security for veterans is critical to maintain social stability and is also important for stabilizing and boosting the military's will and morale and strengthening national defense and military development. He called for education and guidance on a variety of subjects for veterans so that there could be high-quality and full employment for veterans.
- xiv) Narbakzhu, a Tibetan NPC Deputy representing lower-level troops of the Army, said "We Tibetan people will not forget the kindness of the Communist Party from generation to generation. Witnesses of the people's happy life, we resolutely listen to the party's

command and sincerely support Chairman Xi Jinping." He added "Listening to President Xi's command, being responsible to President Xi, and letting President Xi rest assured have become the loudest vows and firmest determination of the generals of the whole army!"

- xv) A representative from the CMC Training and Management Department told reporters that many troops have formed different types of commando teams to push forward the annual major military tasks.

-----  
(The author is a former Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India and is presently President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)

