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CHINESE PRESIDENT XI JINPING FACES DIFFICULT TIMES AHEAD

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There are clear indications that popular dissatisfaction and discontent with Chinese President Xi Jinping inside China continues to simmer just below the surface. The economic slowdown, unemployment and rising cost of living have contributed to the discontent. In fact, accentuated by the US-China trade war, the economic slowdown has begun to impact other areas including the strategic geo-economic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which has seen a drop in investments, and possibly China's defence build-up, with discussions underway in China's military establishment as to whether, for example, the rapid pace of ship building should be slowed down. The negative sentiments could get sharpened as huge numbers of people travel to their hometowns and villages to meet relatives during the annual Chinese New Year holidays in end January. The situation in Hongkong too shows no signs of abating. Chinese President Xi Jinping is likely to face troubled times ahead in the upcoming Year of the Rat.

2. Aware of the spreading negative sentiment inside China, Xi Jinping, who has concentrated unprecedented power and continues to build his personality cult, is strengthening the country's public security apparatus and reinforcing surveillance with Artificial Intelligence (AI). He is, additionally, imposing increasingly restrictive ideological controls combined with strict political 'guidance'. 'Patriotic Education' and Ideology have become the dominant themes over the past few months with citizens constantly exhorted to live by the 'Twelve Socialist Core Values'. Party cadres are assembled across the country for regular training and study sessions under the slogan: "Never forget the original ideal and ambition, keep in mind the mission". This heightened Party supervision includes academia. From October 2019, "student spies" have been mobilised to monitor and report on "radical" political views including of their teachers. They reinforce the Party and public security personnel (PSB) deployed in schools and university campuses since 2018.

3. Several professors and schoolteachers have been dismissed or disciplined for voicing opinions not in conformity with the Party line. Liang Xin, a teacher at a top secondary school in eastern China was last year demoted to school janitor following a report by a student. In April 2019, the Mathematics teacher at the Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Xu Chuanqing, was penalised after her students accused her on social media of comparing them unfavourably to hard-working Japanese students and two months later in June, a teacher at a Beijing secondary school was dismissed for discussing the Tiananmen Square crackdown. More recently in December, Professor Zhao Siyuan, Deputy Dean of the Arts School at Communication University of Zhejiang, was given a “severe warning” for “using inappropriate terms” while addressing new students. Chu Zhaohui, a senior researcher at China’s National Institute of Education, told South China Morning Post (October 20) that “The number of students reporting their teachers has increased recently but official statistics are not available. . . . in some cases high school and university students have been asked by relevant [government] departments to report inappropriate classroom comment.”

4. Guo Shengkun, former Minister of Public Security who as head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s Political and Legal Affairs Commission now oversees the country’s entire security apparatus, recently ratcheted up the security environment. The troubles in Hongkong would have been a contributory factor. In an article in People’s Daily on November 28, 2019, he called for the firm defence of “national political security,” described as “the lifeline of the Party’s and the nation’s security, and an unshakable bottom line.” Guo Shengkun vowed “resolutely and severely to prevent and crack down on” the infiltration of hostile forces and said that construction of the “people’s defense line for national security” should be strengthened. The whole country and the entire population should enhance their awareness of the sense of national security and enhance the nation’s ability to prevent and defend against national security risks. He said that everyone ought to be “on high vigilance, take resolute precautions, and severely punish” infiltration by hostile forces and their destructive and subversive activities to promote secession, thus “building a solid copper and iron wall for national security.” Guo Shengkun advocated concerted efforts to advance national security work and walk the “path of national security with Chinese characteristics.” Regarding issues causing potential social unrest, Guo Shengkun demanded that “small matters stay in the village, big issues go no further than the township, and conflicts are not passed on to higher level authorities.”

5. Notwithstanding the growing restrictions and personal risk, resentment has occasionally spilt over into the public domain. China has always been sensitive to criticism by its leading academics. On October 31, 2019, Tsinghua University Professor Lao Dongyan (劳东燕) emulated another reputed academic and, risking certain punishment, posted a sharply worded approximately 2900-character article on her public Wechat account expressing her worries about facial recognition technology. Professor Lao Dongyan was, incidentally, one of nearly 300 faculty and students at Tsinghua who signed a letter in support of Tsinghua Professor Xu Zhangrun, suspended in July 2019 for warning against the return to totalitarianism and criticisms of the Communist Party. Arguing against use of facial recognition in the Beijing Subway, Professor Lao Dongyan wrote: "I can only say: forgive me, but I cannot accept this type of kindness... We must know that in our society, any personal data, as long as it is controlled by enterprises or other institutions, is also controlled by the government. Because this huge organization is run by specific people, this is equivalent to saying that all personal data, including highly recognizable biometric data, are controlled by a few people in that group... The people who control our data are obviously not God. They have their own selfish desires and weak points. Therefore, it is unknown how they will use our personal data and how they will manipulate our lives. Not to mention, such data may be leaked or hacked due to improper storage, leading to harmful results that may be exploited by criminals." Stating that she also objected to forcing people to undergo face recognition inspections in airports and hotels, she asked whether in a few years genes or fingerprint recognition will be implemented. She recommended that the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee needs to conduct a basic legitimacy review of the Beijing Metro's use of face recognition for classified security checks; at the same time, it should consider initiating corresponding legislative procedures for the arbitrary use of faces.

6. In an unrelated but similar case of academia objecting to Party regulation, students at the prestigious Fudan University in Shanghai were outraged after "freedom of thought" was removed as a core value from its charter. Instead, references strengthening the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s leadership were added to the charters of Fudan and two other universities. On December 18, students of Fudan University gathered at the Danyuan cafeteria in Guanghai Building at Fudan University to sing the school's anthem, which specifically mentions "independent thinking." By December 18 afternoon, a hashtag discussing Fudan University's charter changes had been viewed more than 1.7 million times on Weibo, before being censored later the evening. Lu Xiaoping, Vice President of

the Literature School at Nanjing University, whose charter was also rewritten, posted a comment on Weibo on December 18 -- which was later deleted -- saying "If we do not speak out today about such a blatant challenge to the bottom line of education and academic ethics, I am afraid we will never have the chance!" In addition to Fudan and Nanjing, the Shaanxi Normal University, in north western China was the third university to have its charter altered.

7. A BBC Chinese report (December 6, 2019) reflected the popular dissatisfaction with State surveillance. Stating that Chinese people now had to undergo facial scanning while registering their new mobile phone numbers, it reported the findings of a recent Chinese survey. It disclosed that a research centre affiliated with the Guangzhou-based Southern Metropolis Daily had conducted a survey on facial recognition during October and November 2019. It said among the respondents to the centre's online questionnaire, 57 percent were worried that their personal whereabouts were recorded while nearly 50 percent were worried that criminals may use fake information to perform fraud or theft. Nearly 84 percent of the respondents wanted operators of the facial recognition system to provide them with a channel to view or delete facial data. 74 percent of respondents wanted to choose whether to use facial recognition or traditional methods. The survey, however, also showed that about 60 percent to 70 percent of respondents believe that facial recognition makes public places safer. According to Chinese media, the metro system in Zhengzhou city of Henan province started "riding with face" (using facial recognition in the metro system) in early December. China Daily reported that riders can use facial recognition to authorize payment automatically instead of scanning the QR code on their mobile phones. Currently, passengers can voluntarily choose whether to use facial recognition.

8. Other indicators of internal discontent are the 'leaks' to the foreign press of the wealth allegedly illegally accumulated by Chinese leaders, and to the New York Times of more than 400 pages of 'internal' Chinese documents relating to the detention of the Uyghur minority in heavily guarded camps in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region.

9. While there are presently no signs of any threat to Chinese President Xi Jinping's authority or position, these challenges to the authority of the state have the potential to escalate or be exploited by Xi Jinping's opponents.

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