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'CHINA'S NEW LEADERSHIP IS PREPARING FOR A MILITARY THREAT'

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Amid the flurry of documents submitted and appointments confirmed at the recent plenary sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) -- China's version of a parliament -- and the Chinese People's Consultative Conference (CPPCC) -- China's top political advisory body -- there are indications that China's leadership is rather anxious at the adverse and deteriorating international environment that China faces. The failure of US Secretary of State Blinken to travel to China because of the Chinese spy balloon episode revealed not only the poor state of Sino-US relations but the deep suspicion of China in the US political establishment and Administration. While the recent NPC and CPPCC plenary sessions have given economic development unmistakable priority in a bid to reduce -- if not eliminate -- dependence on the US, national security has been given equal importance.

2. In all his "important" speeches since the 20th Party Congress last October, Chinese President Xi Jinping has been emphasising the "grim" international environment, unpredictable looming difficulties and growing probability of "black swan" or "grey rhinoceros" events that are likely to confront China. In his 29-page Government Work Report to the NPC, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang echoed these concerns. In an unmistakable focus on the economy, he mentioned development 123 times and national security 21 times. China's new Premier and former Party Secretary of Shanghai Li Qiang too, in his first press interview on March 13, focussed on the economy and sought to reassure China's private business entrepreneurs. He also justified the "around 5 per cent" GDP growth target, but struck a cautious note saying that achieving it would be difficult as China will be starting from a high base.

3. There are other signs that the Chinese leadership is very worried at the domestic situation. In addition to the sustained, consecutive 'political education' campaigns, Politburo Standing Committee members have in recent speeches been warning cadres to strictly comply with Party discipline and implement the "Two Establishments". Pointing to inner-Party discontent they, and Xi Jinping, have sounded sharp warnings about the existence of "double-faced" cadres, political gangs, "black-faced" cadres and "political liars". The CDIC Chief Li Xi even warned senior cadres that they are being monitored.

4. There is suggestion of preparations for a military threat too. The NPC Standing Committee has approved the discussion of a law to accelerate approval and enactment of military laws in event of an emergency. People's Liberation Army (PLA) deputies to the NPC and CPPCC expressed the view that passing of laws for the military could take unduly long at times when China is confronted with an emergency. Discussions during the ongoing NPC plenary session

additionally revealed that China plans to rapidly build six aircraft carriers. This will obviously mean a potent and heightened PLA Navy presence in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean with consequent implications for Taiwan, India and the Indian Ocean littoral states. China has also, after an interregnum of two years restored the hike in the national defence budget to over 7 percent and brought it to 7.2 per cent. Reports have separately mentioned that China is increasing its nuclear arsenal.

5. Significant in this context are the retention of 72-year old General Zhang Youxia as Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the “helicopter” promotion of General He Weidong as the second Vice Chairman of the CMC and member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC) Politburo. The retention of General Zhang Youxia and presence of General Li Shangfu, who has a background in space and the PLA Strategic Support Force since 2006, in the CMC as a member and appointment as Defence Minister point to the thrust on the technology modernisation of the PLA continuing till 2027. Indication that the new CMC is “battle-ready” is that five of the seven CMC members have experience of China’s only ‘live’ front, namely the Western Theatre Command.

6. The promotion and appointment of General Liu Zhenli as Head of the PLA Joint Staff Department is important. 59-year old Liu Zhenli has battle experience having participated in the war with Vietnam in 1986-87 and is also among China’s youngest Generals. General Liu Zhenli’s military philosophy includes: accelerated building of a joint combat command system; accelerating transformation of the military, adapting to evolving patterns of war under the conditions of informatization combat requirements; and advancing preparations for military struggle.

7. Yet another pointer to the CCP leadership’s concerns are the recently stepped-up activities of the National Defence Mobilisation Office. Set up in 2016 and headed by Lt General Liu Faqing, who is also a member of the CCP CC, it reports directly to the Central Military Commission (CMC).

8. In an interesting article (March 4), an anonymous Chinese foreign affairs expert wrote that “With the situation in the Taiwan Strait tense, many provinces and cities of the CPC have recently set up national defence mobilisation offices one after another”. Expert analysts point out that this is part of the CCP’s efforts to improve its ability to transition from peacetime to wartime and will help strengthen the CCP’s centralised control over grassroots recruitment, improve coordination between local state-owned defence enterprises, local governments and local military headquarters, as part of national defence mobilisation. The major War Preparation Exercise held by the Guangdong Military Regional Command in May last year is part of these efforts. Some military analysts, however, assess that China is still far from the establishment of a comprehensive wartime system that can support the attack on Taiwan.

9. A report by the Voice of America (VoA) disclosed that from December last year till recently, Beijing, Shanghai, Shandong, Fujian, Wuhan, Hunan, Sichuan, Hubei, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and other important provinces and cities and even remote counties and townships have established national defence mobilisation offices and held ceremonies to publicise this. A senior retired US military officer, who once served as the US Military Attache in China, was quoted as assessing that the failure of the Russian army’s war mobilisation in the invasion of

Ukraine sounded the alarm for the CCP. He said mobilisation is a means of mobilising the people politically and enhancing popular nationalist sentiments. Liu Zhongjing, a historian who worked in Xinjiang's public security system for many years, posted an analysis on Twitter, saying, 'The core of the wartime system is the integration of the military, military sources, military industry, military industry resource producers, and transportation departments'. But, he said, the CCP Military Commission and the State Council, like the Russian Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Economy are divided, making the country incapable of engaging in long-term large-scale wars. He said, therefore, the work of defence mobilisation must be transferred to the party's management.

10. The report added 'With the turmoil in the Taiwan Strait, the Beijing authorities have been making constant moves in conscription and war preparations in recent days. On March 1, Xiamen launched the 'Civil Air Defense Navigation' mobile app platform, which contains the location information of nearly a thousand air-raid shelters in the city; the 'Reserve Personnel Law', which came into effect on the same day, will apply the age limit between 18 and 60 years old'. Stating that there are many obstacles before a truly effective wartime mobilisation system can be established, it quoted He Tianmu, a senior researcher for international security at the RAND Corporation. He Tianmu pointed out that a key persistent challenge of the Chinese defence system is the lack of integration of information systems between the civilian sector, the business community, and military commanders. This problem has plagued the PLA mobilisation system for many years, and has apparently not been resolved. Liu Zhongjing pointed out that the National Development and Reform Commission, which reports to Xi Jinping, can only cooperate and connect a small number of state-owned military industrial groups. He said it would be able to connect with most market-oriented resource production enterprises after the powers of the National Development and Reform Commission are further increased. Asserting that this has not yet started and, therefore, it is impossible for a war to break out within a year or two, he cautioned that the timetable starts when the two sessions end.

11. Reports show that China's national defence mobilization system has been undergoing continuous reform to strengthen the country's capacity to counter threats to the party and homeland, especially since Xi Jinping took over as China's President. According to the report issued by Recorded Future in March 2022, this includes cataloguing the thousands of military and civilian resources that the party-state and People's Liberation Army (PLA) can bring to bear to uphold China's sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and security at home and abroad. The first section of the report draws on a draft document authored by the CMC's National Defense Mobilization Department (NDMD) to present 'A New Mobilization Planning System', which enumerates the full range of resources available to military-civil fusion mobilization efforts. These resources include those in China and overseas and relate to weapons research, maritime transport, cyber capabilities, public opinion guidance, natural resources, and space-based technologies. It says another core part of national defence mobilization reform is the creation of increasingly specialized militia forces, an effort that began in the early 2000s but has accelerated under CCP CC General Secretary Xi Jinping's leadership. These forces are intended to carry out emergency response tasks, support the needs of modern warfare, and help extend China's military power into new strategic spaces such as cyberspace, outer space, and the polar regions.

12. The detailed "Party and State Institutional Reform Plan" jointly issued by the CCP CC and the State Council and published by Xinhua on March 16, specified that Reform tasks at the central level should be completed by the end of 2023, and reform tasks at the local level be completed by the end of 2024. These reforms envisage enhanced Party control and supervision over finance, security and other entities. Relevant is that there has been no easing in China's military posture since the 20th Party Congress last October.

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