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SIGNS OF WESTERN THEATRE COMMAND'S IMPORTANCE BEFORE UPCOMING 20<sup>TH</sup> PARTY CONGRESS

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As the sword-arm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has enjoyed pre-eminent status as its third pillar since the founding of the People's Republic of China. However, as the old 'Revolutionary' leaders began fading and new leaders without links to the PLA began taking over, China's leadership began placing restraints on the PLA's political clout in order to maintain the CCP's supremacy and authority over the PLA. It's membership and, therefore authority, in the CCP's Politburo was gradually reduced to two.

Acutely conscious of the fate of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Chinese President Xi Jinping is particularly concerned that the army remains 'an army of the Party' and to ensure this mandated a series of consecutive year long education campaigns in to instil ideology and the correct political orientation among the soldiers.

Xi Jinping's grip on the PLA is near absolute. He has used the CCP's anti-graft outfit, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), to weed out Generals of doubtful loyalty and, by September 2017 had dismissed over 4,885 officers, or nearly 40 per cent of the PLA officer corps. Convening an 'enlarged' meeting of the CMC within two days of taking over as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and President of China in November 2012, Xi Jinping announced that political reliability and loyalty would trump all other considerations and be the sole determining criteria for promotions in the PLA. He also began taking steps to ensure that the PLA is "absolutely obedient" to the CCP and the Chairman of the CMC. Today, each of the Generals in the PLA has been appointed by Xi Jinping. Xi Jinping has also donned an operational role and appointed himself Commander-in-Chief.

With the PLA maintaining its number of Delegates to the upcoming 20th Party Congress at 304 despite its downsizing by 300,000 personnel, it appears the PLA might continue to retain around 37 Full Members and 22 Alternate Members in the new 20th CCP Central Committee (CC) as it had in the outgoing 19th CCP CC. Its representation in the Politburo is also unlikely to be reduced. This makes the PLA's role and presence in the Party Congress and National People's Congress (NPC) important and would give Xi Jinping added leverage in the CCP CC.

Relevant for India is the attention being paid by Xi Jinping to the PLA Western Theatre Command (WTC). The largest of China's five Theatre Commands, it exercises operational jurisdiction over China's borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal and Myanmar. Its tasks include protection of Chinese personnel and assets deployed on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Western Theatre Command is operationally responsible for

the intrusions in the Ladakh region in April 2020. The entire 4057 kilometre Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China has got activated since then.

Interesting in this backdrop of continuing tension and deployment of approximately 60,000-70,000 troops in the high altitude eastern Ladakh is that the number of Delegates representing the PLA WTC at the 20th Party Congress is nearly double that of the other four Theatre Commands. The WTC has selected 30 Delegates to the 20th Party Congress compared to the 15-19 by the others. There are other signs of the leadership's attention to the WTC. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited and met WTC officers on three occasions in the past year. He met them in Lhasa on July 23, 2021, in Chengdu on July 9, 2022 and again on July 15, 2022 in Urumqi. The WTC receives advanced military hardware and latest jet aircraft ahead of all other Theatre Commands, except the Eastern Command. The 14<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan approved last March sanctioned massive infrastructure construction plans scheduled for completion by 2030-35. These include three new railways, a new highway and upgrading of others and 30 additional airfields in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and surrounding areas. The timelines, interestingly, match those mentioned in the article published in June 2013 by the China-owned Hongkong-based Wen Wei Po, of the wars that China will fight in the next 50 years. It projected the third war with India, for the "reconquest of southern Tibet", as taking place between 2035-2040!

Furthermore, there is little sign of abatement of the considerable widespread discontent inside China, further inflamed by the 'zero Covid' policy and unending lockdowns. A PLA Daily editorial had earlier warned that the United States could 'use the tense domestic situation in China to fan social upheaval and provoke social conflict'. "Colour revolutions" is a serious worry for the Chinese leadership. Significant for China's neighbours and India is the fresh warning issued just weeks before the 20th Party Congress scheduled for mid-October. This was through a Commentator's article, which conveys the views of the CCP CC.

Releasing the "Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Population-Wide (全民) National Defense Education Work", this Commentator's article in the People's Daily (September 2) stated that the world has become increasingly turbulent and more prone to change. In an unusually candid statement it acknowledged that the "country's security situation has become increasingly unstable and uncertain." It also disclosed the CCP leadership's concern at the increasingly "prominent issues" related to maritime disputes and the "increased likelihood of chaos on our doorstep," thus making the task of "defending the country's political security and social stability more formidable."

The latest warning clearly implies that Xi Jinping is facing a difficult period and will be on edge. CCP cadres, the public security apparatus and the PLA, including the WTC, are certainly on high alert. In case the situation doesn't improve, or deteriorates, and the CCP's authority and legitimacy are perceived as beginning to erode, Xi Jinping will be tempted to divert attention and resort to military actions abroad. He would be tempted too if he assesses that Putin is inching towards victory in Ukraine. In this backdrop any expectations, including any prompted by disingenuous Chinese media comments or the tactical disengagement at the Gogra-Hot Springs (PP-15), that Xi Jinping will change his attitude or policy towards India will be unfounded and premature.

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

