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THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY (PLA) AND CHINA'S 20TH PARTY CONGRESS

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The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the sword arm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It has been the strongest pillar of the Party and has had a presence and voice in the Party's highest echelons since almost the very founding of the CCP. This is reflected at the Party Congress held every five years where the Work Report of the Government approved by the Party also sets the task for the PLA for the coming five years. For example, Xi Jinping set a timeline for China's defence modernization at the 19th Party Congress in 2017. It mandated that the PLA would accomplish its military modernization drive by 2035 and the country would strive for global military leadership by mid-century. The PLA's tasking has been revised at this 20th Party Congress. The separate section on National Defence in the Work Report titled 'Centenary goal of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and further modernising National Defence and the Military', therefore, needs to be carefully parsed.

2. As the revolutionary Chinese Communist cadres began to fade from the scene, Deng Xiaoping realised that the Party apparatchiks who would be taking over leadership of the Party lacked military credentials and could find it difficult to enforce the CCP's leadership over the PLA. CCP cadres taking over as General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee (CC) were also aware of this shortcoming and this was visible during Hu Jintao's term. Xi Jinping's personal information, publicised in 2012 when he took over as CCP CC General Secretary, also pointedly revealed that when he was private secretary (*mishu*) to then Chinese Defence Minister Geng Biao he held 'active' military rank in 1979. In addition, Xi Jinping began exercising close control over the PLA including conferring on himself the 'operational' military rank of Commander-in-Chief.

3. To facilitate Party control over the military, Deng Xiaoping introduced a slew of reforms designed to reduce the influence of the PLA Commanders and abolish their power base. The PLA's representation in the higher echelons of the Party was brought down to the current 2 members in the Politburo. The process continued under Chinese Presidents Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping who restored the authority of the Political Commissars and once again made their inputs important determinants for promotions of the field Commanders. The Political Commissars were also given additional operational responsibilities. In 2013, Xi Jinping brought the PLA within the purview of the CCP's anti-corruption watchdog body the Central Discipline Inspection Commission. By 2015-16, Xi Jinping pushed through and implemented the most far-reaching reforms ever in the PLA. The reforms are intended to restructure, reorganise and streamline the PLA. The reforms downsized the PLA by 300,000 personnel with the ground forces affected the most. In addition, Xi Jinping has been putting

the PLA through consecutive year-long political education campaigns to ensure it's "absolute obedience" to the CCP. The Work Report of 2022 dwells extensively on ensuring the loyalty and "absolute obedience" of the PLA to the CCP, its CC and Commander-in-Chief.

4. Underscoring its importance and notwithstanding the downsizing, the PLA has retained its representation in the 20th CC of the CCP at the 20th Party Congress (October 16-22). In fact, it's representation has marginally increased from the 37 members it had in the 19th CCP CC in 2017 to 43 members in the 20th CCP CC. Its representation in the Politburo remains at two. A surprise entry to the Politburo and the Central Military Commission (CMC) is General He Weidong who was neither a member nor alternate member of the 19th CCP CC. The service-wise representation is: PLA Army (Ground Forces) – 23; PLA Air Force -5; PLA Navy – 10; PLA Rocket Force – 2; and People's Armed Police Force – 3.

5. The section on National Defence in the Work Report presented to the 20th Party Congress was 926 words, somewhat lengthier than that presented to the 19th Party Congress in 2017 which contained 794 words. Quite apart from its length, the Work Report to the 20th Party Congress dwelt a lot on the efforts by foreign powers to "blackmail, contain, blockade, and exert maximum pressure on China" implying the role envisaged for the PLA. The Work Report also advanced the date for "more quickly" elevating the armed forces to "world class standards" to 2027 – the PLA's founding centenary. While Xi Jinping had stated this earlier in 2021, now with the 20th Party Congress approving the Work Report it has the stamp of approval of the entire Party. The pace of modernisation and strengthening of the PLA will henceforth gather momentum.

6. An important addition in this Work Report is the exhortation to "simultaneously carry out operations, boost combat preparedness and enhance our military capabilities". It did not clarify whether carrying "out operations" would mean simulation exercises, training or giving troops experience through actual manoeuvres along the borders. The Report later said: "our military will remain both steadfast and flexible as it carries out its operations" and "This will enable us to shape our security posture, deter and manage crises and conflicts, and win local wars". These two sentences together suggest that these operations will have a definite military objective with inherent implications for India, where they are attempting to "shape the security posture". This opens the strong possibility of China incrementally undertaking further actions along the 4057 kms long India-China border to protect its investments in PoK, Gilgit and Baltistan where China is building additional defence infrastructure. It would similarly initiate actions in Arunachal Pradesh. Shaping the security posture is, of course, equally applicable to Taiwan, which is witnessing frequent consecutive air and sea operations around it.

7. The Work Report additionally stated that mechanisation, informationisation, and application of smart technologies will be accelerated. Xi Jinping and the PLA have already been laying considerable emphasis on applying S&T to the military especially under the Civil-Military programme. The presence of 29 members with backgrounds in S&T in the 20th CC and the induction of General Li Shangfu, an aerospace engineer who is likely to be appointed Defence Minister, in the CMC will accelerate these efforts. China has invested huge amounts of capital as it has sought to synergise the efforts of private tech enterprises, state-run institutes and laboratories and the PLA. Artificial Intelligence is one important area.

Unmanned Underwater Vessel (UUV), Drone swarm technologies, Quantum communications etc are examples. The Centre for Security and Emerging Technologies estimated in 2019 that expenditure on R&D alone for military-related technology was US\$ 2.7 billion. S&T's priority has been appreciably elevated at the 20th Party Congress in the wake of recent US restrictions on the sale of microchips, microprocessors etc as well as hardware, technology and knowledge required for their fabrication or technology.

8. The section elaborating the 'Centenary goal of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and further modernising National Defence and the Military' includes other important disclosures. Of import is disclosure of the decision to establish "a strong system of strategic deterrence, increase the proportion of new-domain forces with new combat capabilities". This confirms reports that China is increasing its nuclear arsenal and also that it intends to enlarge the PLA Strategic Support Force and PLA Rocket Force and enhance their combat capabilities. Hinting that the PLA is being prepared for multiple roles, Xi Jinping said the PLA will be flexible in its operations.

9. Of special significance to the region and China's neighbours are Xi Jinping's observations on Taiwan and the military. Language on containing Taiwan's independence was inserted and stronger phrases used to reaffirm "two countries, one system". Striking an uncompromising stance on Taiwan and "realising China's complete reunification", Xi Jinping asserted that "We will implement our Party's overall policy for resolving the Taiwan question in the new era". He added "complete reunification of our country must be realised and it can, without doubt, be realised." This assertion implied that it will be achieved during Xi Jinping's term in office and was greeted with resounding applause by the Delegates to the 20th Party Congress. Xi Jinping also said in the Work Report that while China will strive for peaceful reunification "we will never promise to renounce the use of force".

10. Important is the assertion in the Work Report that the PLA's modernisation will "enable us to shape our security posture, deter and manage crises and conflicts, and win local wars". The term "win local wars" is new and was not mentioned in the previous Report of 2017. It undoubtedly addresses the current 'live' tensions along the India-China border and around Taiwan. In the backdrop of China's plans for a massive border defence infrastructure build-up and naval capability, the reference to winning local wars is pertinent. It has immediate implications for India in the context of the ongoing tension on the borders in eastern Ladakh. The screening of the clip of the clashes in the Galwan Valley in mid-June 2020, certainly with the approval of the highest echelons, to all 2340 delegates to the Congress and the 83 senior veteran cadres on the opening day of the 20th Party Congress underscored the negative portrayal of India.

11. The section on National defence in the Work Report approved by the 20th Party Congress suggests that the PLA's present deployment on India's borders in Eastern Ladakh should be viewed as one phase of a longer-term plan. It is probable that in order to "shape the security posture" preparatory to border, or territorial, negotiations with India, the PLA will initiate additional military actions including incursions. China is a long-term problem for India and the region.

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