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Centre for China Analysis & Strategy

中国分析及策略中心

25 February 2021

'QUICK GLIMPSE INTO CHINA'S UPCOMING ANNUAL 'BIG TWO' SESSIONS'

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With just a couple of weeks to go before China's 'Big Two' -- the popular name for the plenary sessions of China's version of a parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC) and the top political advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) -- there are no signs of any easing in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s efforts to promote Chinese communist ideology. The deliberations at the NPC and CPPCC sessions will reveal China's priorities for this year and the longer term. The Reports are expected to bear the unmistakable imprimatur of Xi Jinping.

2. As done last year, the authorities are taking precautions to ensure the health and safety of the well over 5,000 Deputies, delegates and officials who will gather in Beijing for the sessions at a time when the pandemic has not yet abated. The People's Daily (February 2) disclosed that the number of journalists permitted to cover the Fourth Session of the Thirteenth National People's Congress (NPC) and the Fourth Session of the Thirteenth CPPCC National Committee, which will open in Beijing on March 5 and March 4, 2021, respectively, will be restricted. It clarified that some Chinese and foreign journalists in Beijing would be invited to cover the conference, but foreign journalists will not be invited on temporary visits to Beijing. Interviews would mainly be conducted through the Internet, video, written, etc. In accordance with past practice, stringent security measures can be anticipated to blanket Beijing.

3. Preparatory to the annual plenary sessions the CCP has continued the steady build-up of Xi Jinping's personality cult. Media coverage of Xi Jinping has been increasing since he took over the country's three top posts in November 2012 and, according to a very recent analysis it today surpasses even that of Mao Zedong. A recent example is the article in the CCP's official newspaper 'People's Daily' on February 24. The article was spread over the entire first three pages of the newspaper and lauded Xi Jinping's personal contribution and role in the poverty alleviation campaign that was pronounced to have been successfully completed on schedule in November 2020. The article left no doubt of Xi Jinping's role mentioning him 139 times!

4. Ideological campaigns to fortify China with communism and reinforce the commitment of Party members have continued to be initiated. In February alone two campaigns were launched. Most recent is the campaign to 'study the development of Party history learning and education'. It was kicked-off with Xi Jinping's "important" speech at the Party History Study and Education Mobilization Conference held in Beijing on February 20, which was telecast by the state-run CCTV the same day. In his speech Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasised that the development of party history learning and education in the whole party

is a 'new starting point for the party Central Committee based on the party's century-old history, coordinating the overall strategy of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and major changes in the world unseen in a century, and mobilizing the whole party and the country'. He exhorted "all comrades in the party" to learn history, learn party history etc. Xinhua (February 21) explained that "As the Communist Party of China is about to usher in its centennial birthday, the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core requires the development of party history learning and education throughout the party, declaring the firm determination of the Communists in the new era to keep their original aspirations in mind and keep their mission in mind." The Xinhua article marks the start of a new education campaign in the CCP to study Party history.

5. Earlier on February 4, the People's Daily front-paged an important over 6000-character editorial signalling the start of a campaign to energise the CCP's 130 million-strong Young Pioneers that was created in 1949. Outlining the start of a serious effort, it said the Young Pioneers is "a school for children to learn socialism and communism with Chinese characteristics, and is a reserve team for building socialism and communism". It stressed that the "Young Pioneers, comprehensively strengthen the building of the party ... and focus on training Communism successor, focusing on inheriting the red gene".

6. Interesting was that the article, published by the Editorial Department of the People's Daily, included references to 'Xi Jinping' and 'Xi Jinping Thought' six times, but mentioned none of China's other leaders like Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping!

7. The centrepiece and focus of the NPC and CPPCC sessions will be the 'Report on the Work of the Government' that will be presented by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. The report will detail China's achievements over the past year despite the deleterious economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The economy will be a focus of Li Keqiang's Work Report. Some CPPCC Delegates have been quoted by Asia Times as saying that Premier Li Keqiang would set a "soft" GDP growth target, around 4-5%, for the year. Other important aspects in the Work Report would include the need to promote agriculture and increase food-grain production, the decline in China's working-age population, and the crucial technology sector, which after former U.S. President Trump targeted China's 'Made in China' programme was set back by at least 5 years. Professor Wong Kam-fai, a CPPCC Delegate and Deputy Dean of the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Department of Systems Engineering and Engineering Management, was quoted by Asia Times as saying China's chip and integrated circuit sector would need 8 to 10 years to play catch-up and even pull ahead of Western competitors to eventually tackle the United States' export bans. It said he expressed optimism that China may narrow the gap in chip design and manufacturing in the mid-2030s and create a TSMC-like chipmaker by then.

8. Agriculture and grain production are sensitive issues for China's leadership. The Chinese leadership's apprehensions of a potential global food grain shortage within the next 10 years was highlighted in April last year by a current member of the CPPCC National Committee and former Vice Minister of the CCP Central Committee (CC)'s International Liaison Department (ILD). As it has done for the past 18 years, the CCP CC issued its Central Document No: 1 on Agriculture -- the first Document of 2021. The document stressed that efforts will be made to vitalise China's rural sector, modernise agriculture and raise farmer's incomes. Reporting the

issue of Document No: 1, the state-owned CGTN explained that rural income growth is expected to outpace urban income growth and that the modernisation of agriculture and rural areas will make significant progress and construction of rural infrastructure facilities will be basically completed by 2025. The Document urged governments at all levels to retain the "red line" of 1.8 billion mu (120 million hectares) of arable land. These will undoubtedly find mention in the Work Report.

9. The steady decline in China's population despite the full removal of birth restrictions on the population in 2015 are causing concern to China's leadership. There was a 15% decline from the 11.8 million babies registered in 2019 combined with the drop in China's marriage rate, which plunged to 6.6 per 1,000 people in 2019, the lowest level in 14 years. China's National Statistics Bureau has estimated that China had 254 million elderly residents aged 60 or above in 2019, or 18% of the whole population of 1.4 billion. China's Ministry of Civil Affairs expects that number to rise to 300 million by 2025, prompting concerns that China's state pension scheme could run out of funding by 2035. This is a vital issue of maintaining social stability for the Party. The "Recommendations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-term Goals for 2035", dwelt on the need to formulate a long-term population development strategy. Recently on February 19, China's National Health Commission suggested to the Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning regional governments that they should submit a pilot program for implementing a comprehensive family planning policy in the region. The suggestion was made in a response to a proposal by some NPC Deputies.

10. Technology is an important area of endeavour for China's leaders and will feature prominently in Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's Work Report. The state-owned CCTV News highlighted on February 14, that "Technological independence and self-reliance is the strategic support of national development" and that the Central Economic Work Conference at the end of last year had prioritised that strengthening the national strategic scientific and technological capabilities is the first key task of this year. It disclosed that during his inspections on the eve of the Spring Festival over the years, General Secretary Xi Jinping has visited scientific and technological workers many times and that "General Secretary Xi Jinping is very concerned about technological innovation". Xinhua separately noted that President Xi Jinping or Premier Li Keqiang may attend the panel discussions of NPC and CPPCC deputies from the nation's research institutes as well as private tech companies to seek policy recommendations.

11. Li Keqiang's Work Report will state the progress made in this sector. The Beijing-based Economic Observer newspaper noted that sectors like chips, jet engines, next-generation telecommunication solutions and vaccines and drugs against infectious diseases, would receive ample funding. Civil-Military Fusion is also playing a role. Huawei, under the auspices of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, was reported by Asia Times at the end of January 2021, as having initiated the pooling of scientific human resources of Peking University, Tsinghua University, the People's Liberation Army's National University of Defense Technology as well as 90 Chinese chip designers and foundries for the establishment of a national integrated circuit standardization committee. NPC deputies from Shenzhen, who have been lobbying for more state-private sector joint platforms to foster tech breakthroughs, may present proposals at the NPC session. Politburo Standing Committee

member and NPC Chairman Li Zhanshu, is reported to have instructed the NPC secretariat to draft legislative proposals based on recommendations from Huawei, its partners and the science ministry.

12. Interesting will be the deliberations of NPC Deputies and CPPCC Delegates in the various panels. The PLA Deputies will hold discussions in separate panels, but they usually share some views with the media. The NPC will, additionally, approve the Long-Term Goals for 2035 thereby implicitly endorsing confidence in Xi Jinping's leadership.

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