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MAKING THE MOST OF IT, PART II: XI JINPING LEVERAGES CORONAVIRUS “WAR WITHOUT SMOKE” TO SPUR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION, TEST NATIONAL DEFENSE MOBILIZATION

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General Secretary Xi Jinping’s exhortation to “turn danger into opportunity”¹ in the face of the coronavirus epidemic pandemic undergirds much of the Communist Party’s current domestic propaganda that seeks to drive China’s “economic restart.”² The “opportunity” provided by the pandemic to accelerate construction of China’s “new-type (digital) infrastructure,”³ which includes leveraging the coronavirus-driven global shift to 5G business and industrial platforms, has been one of the Party’s economic and technological exemplars.⁴ But Xi’s guidance on crisis management, in effect “making the most of it,” was designed for wider application. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) seized Xi Jinping’s guidance early, leveraging the unique crisis conditions it created, a “war without smoke,”⁵ to test and envision further modernization of military operations and activities ranging from peacetime defense mobilization and expanded military medical diplomacy⁶ to improvements in its ability to fight and win future informatized local wars.⁷

Despite being tied to the pandemic or “economic restart,” current Chinese domestic propaganda efforts on topics ranging from “crisis management” to “digital transformation” and “defense mobilization” did not originate with the coronavirus. Instead, each represents an agile repackaging of Communist Party guidance and propaganda messaging that was already months or years old. Facing a crisis of confidence following its muddled response to the coronavirus outbreak, domestic propaganda efforts were initiated within days or weeks to remold the Party image. Instead of starting from scratch, existing campaigns were repackaged to highlight a Party that was not only in control and leading the crisis response, but even taking advantage of the crisis to accelerate China’s domestic and international goals.

During his inspection tour of Zhejiang Province in late March 2020, Xi Jinping made the highly publicized statement that “danger and opportunity always coexist . . . seize and create opportunity from the crisis and the difficulty you face.”⁸ Xi used the tour to spur the country’s economic restart and this statement would become one of the Communist Party’s hallmarks to encourage business and industry across China to see

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and create economic opportunities out of the epidemic. More broadly though, Xi described opportunities created by the epidemic pandemic that were wider and more strategic, from the general acceleration of science and technology to the general optimization and upgrading of industry,⁹ all based on the heightened epidemic-driven imperative for China's across-the-board digital transformation.¹⁰ The roots of Xi's guidance and the ensuing propaganda campaign, however, preceded the Zhejiang tour by almost a year. At the time, the guidance was directed at a wide and senior audience of Communist Party leaders.

Xi laid out his vision for crisis management during two Party leadership meetings in January 2019, well timed for the public health crisis that had yet to materialize. The first was the "Central Conference on Political and Legal Work,"¹¹ followed by a "Provincial-Level Special Seminar for Leading Cadre,"¹² both held in Beijing during the second and third weeks of January. Xi spoke at each event where he highlighted his vision for preventing and mitigating major risk in a wide variety of circumstances including politics, ideology, economics, science and technology, (domestic) society, the external environment, and Party building.¹³ Although it did not receive much attention outside China, Xi's vision to "turn danger into opportunity" was first introduced here.

At these meetings, Xi admonished Party leaders to anticipate crises of all kinds before they happen, and when they do occur, his expectation was that these leaders will show creativity and initiative to find the opportunity inherent in the crisis.¹⁴ At the central conference, Xi called on Party leaders to have the "courage to act" and to "take the strategic initiative" to "change risk into safety" and "turn danger into opportunity."¹⁵ He would repeat a similar message at the provincial-level seminar but added the colorful metaphors of "black swans" and "gray rhinos" to illuminate his direction to Party leaders to maintain a high degree of vigilance,¹⁶ "gray rhinos" accurately describing the context for the epidemic pandemic that was still months away. When Beijing decided it was advantageous to shift blame to Party leaders in Hubei province and Wuhan city for the Communist Party's initial response to the coronavirus epidemic, Party commentary tied their mistakes to not applying Xi's January guidance on crisis management.¹⁷

Chinese military commentators found Xi's "dialectic logic" on "danger and opportunity" an apt template for grading the performance of the PLA during the early stages of the epidemic pandemic.¹⁸ One academic at the PLA National Defense University College of National Security Studies offered that the insights gained from the PLA's participation in epidemic prevention and control could be used to improve its ability to win future informatized local wars,¹⁹ a view repeated by other experts in the Chinese military.²⁰ Mirroring Xi Jinping's broader guidance to the Party, the same academic argued that the circumstances surrounding the epidemic pandemic are relevant to conditions China's military could face in future informatized local wars: sudden outbreak and rapid escalation, individual actions generating wide and unexpected outcomes, and the necessity to rapidly take the strategic initiative to turn the situation in your favor.

Military and civilian commentators alike highlighted that conditions like these pointed to the importance of a comprehensive digital economy and infrastructure, 5G-driven online platforms and ecosystems, and the high-technology innovation need to support both. This was not new language, much of it based on guidance from Xi Jinping years before.²¹ However, now it was repackaged to highlight a Communist Party that had seen and reacted quickly to global business opportunities opened by the pandemic, not anything like the Party that slept through the viral outbreak. Military commentators also jumped on the "opportunity" to highlight epidemic pandemic-driven insights. In addition to the continued importance of military-civilian

fusion, experts pointed to the epidemicpandemic-driven recommendation that ongoing PLA high-technology programs like digitalization and intelligentization must continue.

One of the most widely covered aspects of PLA support to the epidemic pandemic fight was activation of China's National Defense Mobilization System, a wartime capability designed to synchronize the combat support functions and capabilities provided by China's regular military, armed police, reserves, and militia.²² Mobilization was a modernization priority of Xi Jinping's prior to the pandemic, and the coronavirus outbreak created an "opportunity" to test, in particular, the civilian-military coordination functions needed to support PLA requirements at the coronavirus "frontline." Reflecting the inherent organizational and institutional superiority of China's system, Xi Jinping viewed the mobilization system as a "magic weapon,"²³ a warfighting capability that China's potential adversaries do not and could not possess. Some of the "magic" was embedded in the system's bidirectional coordination mechanisms, processing both the expanding PLA requirements for the civilian economy and the corresponding civilian requirements for militia and reserve support to expanding industrial, agricultural and societal needs at the local level.

Activation was viewed as both a civic effort to support a public health crisis and a "training ground and whetstone" to test and improve the defense mobilization system for future warfare. Reserve and militia members were mobilized to fulfill wide-ranging requirements organized by five functional areas [political mobilization, science and technology mobilization, economic mobilization, People's Armed Forces mobilization, and the transportation readiness system]²⁴. Key tasks performed by militia and reservists included: supporting expanded production of medical equipment and supplies to answer widespread shortages,²⁵ assisting the families of military medical and logistic staff that had been forward deployed to Hubei province and Wuhan city,²⁶ aiding in agricultural planting and harvesting,²⁷ supporting epidemic control and prevention efforts inside community grids,²⁸ managing and coordinating communications between the "front line" in Hubei province and supporting rear areas,²⁹ and producing and distributing local propaganda materials to help guide public opinion regarding the epidemicpandemic.³⁰

Although domestic media generally glowed about reserve and militia contributions to fighting the pandemic, commentators and local commanders often provided a more balanced assessment, highlighting the capabilities inherent in the system but also the significant flaws that remained, each of these better exposed by the "war without smoke." One military commentator highlighted that defense mobilization and crisis management are two independent systems in China, but based on the insights from Wuhan, should be integrated in the future.³¹ Although the primary function of each is different, supporting combat versus handling emergencies, the processes and players often overlap. Integration would bring organizational and operational efficiencies, particularly if China faced another pandemic or an informatized local war in the future. Above all, future requirements for both systems, military and civilian, required China's continued drive for digitalization, intelligentization, and informatization.

One repeated recommendation to improve the mobilization system in the aftermath of Wuhan was to develop an e-commerce platform to support China's existing global distribution system. Under normal conditions or emergencies, it would improve the efficiency of China's operations. During wartime, it would provide a global capability to supplement China's military logistics system.³² Especially important, countries that maintained "strategic cooperative partnerships" with China would be expected to assist China's war effort with goods and supplies.³³ Other problems with the mobilization system were also identified, ranging from the need to train Party and government leaders on the mobilization system in advance to improving the functionality of command communications supporting defense mobilization.³⁴ Importantly though, what united nearly all the questions and answers is the common reference point used

to frame them: The Communist Party's leadership in finding the "opportunity" to identify and solve the problem.

It is unlikely that the pandemic stressed or tested the defense mobilization system, or even parts of it, at the same level as war. Nor was the Party's propaganda approach regarding digitalization substantially different before or after the Wuhan lockdown. What differed was presentation. While lessons were certainly learned about mobilization, and infrastructure requirements may have been refined, the propaganda approach itself was mostly about the Party. Domestic news led with stories about the heroics of mobilization and the Party that led it. Citizens often heard about the "opportunity" the Party identified to assess the mobilization system. No one in China could miss the "opportunity" the Party identified to fill expanding global commerce requirements by accelerating the construction of digital infrastructure and online platforms. Tying the Party to the "opportunities" created by the pandemic and not the "danger" that produced them was and is the primary objective. The real crisis, Party governance during the coronavirus outbreak, is avoided.

The views expressed in these articles are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.
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