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Issue Brief

Role of PLA in COVID-19 Response

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S*ummary*

The PLA followed a three-pronged approach to COVID-19 response management. It sought to control the spread of the virus within the military and in outbreak areas, such as Wuhan. It handled emergency operations by deploying its Joint Logistics Support Department that provided supplies and staff to the infected areas. Moreover, it showed its adversaries its resolve to protect its core interests in times of a pandemic by undertaking deterrence operations. This led to more aggressive PLA actions, especially in the maritime domain, in response to a perceived threat from its adversaries.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unexpected crisis for militaries across the world. It has raised questions over not only the military's role in preventing a pandemic but also the impact of such an outbreak on military readiness. This issue brief analyses the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) role during the COVID-19 crisis.

The highly infectious rate of COVID-19 raises scepticism about China's claim of zero infection in its military. It also tempts one to assume that China's military readiness has been compromised. However, an analysis of the PLA's priorities and responses during the epidemic indicate that military preparedness became one of the foremost objectives of the Chinese central leadership. It is the culmination of military reforms initiated in 2015 to strengthen the Central Military Commission's (CMC) leadership and streamline the Chinese military into responding to a centralised command. Arguably, the leadership saw the COVID-19 crisis as a way to prove itself as a formidable military power, thereby defining the PLA's role during the COVID-19 epidemic.

In this context, three broad approaches of the PLA can be identified:

First, the CMC was keen to adopt strategies that would keep its military personnel free of infection without impinging its military training.

Second, the PLA wanted to prove its credentials as a highly capable and coordinated force that the public can rely on to carry out relief operations, deploy frontline medical staff and, most significantly, demonstrate its scientific capabilities by creating a vaccine for COVID-19.

Third, China wanted to signal that the PLA's pre-occupation with deploying its forces for emergency operations was neither 'out of ordinary' nor deviated its attention from defending its core interests.

Curtailing COVID-19 Within the Military

First, in January, when the COVID-19 epidemic was fast spreading, one of the main responsibilities of the CMC was to ensure that its military personnel are free of biological infection. The Academy of Military Medical Sciences (AMMS), under the PLA Academy of Military Sciences, had been in the forefront of establishing the strategy of 'early detection, early diagnosis and early treatment' in the community. They were able to establish mobile laboratories to conduct tests in outbreak areas and show that the PLA personnel were also tested with efficiency.¹ For instance, in

¹ Sun Li and Zhang Zhewei, "**Our Experts of Academy for Military Medical Sciences are on the Frontline of War in Epidemic Prevention and Control**" (我军军事医学专家奋战疫情防控阻击战一线), *Guofang Shikong*, February 01, 2020.

Beijing alone, more than 100 institutions were responsible for conducting tests on officers and every household member associated with the military units.²

Further, one of the primary research priorities was to ascertain the way infection spreads so that the lessons could be further applied for prevention control (if the aerosol transmission was possible). This constant feedback between AMMS and its direct authority, the CMC, ensured that the latter was able to use the information to modify training schedules. Moreover, the military reforms of 2015 had resulted in PLA's military hospitals being centralised, for example, the PLA General Hospital under the PLA Logistics Support Department. It enabled the hospitals to use the 'joint operations system', for the first time, to coordinate and dispatch medics to control the spread of the epidemic within the military.³

The military also called upon the veterans to be prepared for a return to active duty. The local governments too were directed to work with the military to roll out a series of measures to prevent further infection.⁴ In this context, the PLA deployed retired soldiers to raise funds and charities for medical equipment and also help tackle the epidemic in several frontline areas. This helped reduce the burden of the PLA, allowing them to focus more on priority engagements.

Second, the PLA has a history of using its forces within the confines of borders for non-military operations, including epidemic prevention and control. The Chinese believe that unlike the United States (US), which deploys its military forces predominantly outside its borders, the Chinese military, especially the People's Armed Police, has credible experience in combating natural disasters, having specifically trained for such scenarios.⁵ This argument might hold little water as the US has a civilian infrastructure and the National Guard that can respond to natural disasters as was seen during the Ebola outbreak. However, it could be argued that China has become adept in deploying its military forces (people's war doctrine's impact) for natural disasters. This experience has held them in good stead while tackling the COVID-19 crisis.

Third, the CMC had tasked the PLA to modify its annual training tasks while suspending large-scale drills and training manoeuvres. Accordingly, the PLA modified its training schedule, including the training site and the number of participants for the training, implemented "differentiated training" based on risk

² Zhao Fang and Duan Jiangshan, "**A Sample of the System Advantage of Strategic Health Strength**" (一支战略卫勤力量的“体系优势”样本), *PLA Daily*, April 30, 2020.

³ Ibid. For further details on the Joint Logistics Support Group in every military region and the broader reforms in logistics, see Kevin McCauley, "**China's Military Reforms and Modernization: Implication for the United States**", Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 15, 2018.

⁴ Minnie Chan, "**China's military put to the crisis test in coronavirus call-up**", *South China Morning Post*, February 09, 2020.

⁵ "**The No of US Military Aircraft Carrier in the Pacific Ocean Turns to Zero, Zero Infections in the PLA, While Facing Disaster, Why are the US and China Different?**" (美军驻太平洋航母归零·解放军零感染·灾情面前·中美为何不同?), *dy.163.com*, April 14, 2020.

factors in local areas, and restricted large-scale training in areas with severe outbreaks.⁶ For instance, the East Sea Fleet Command (东部战区海军) redesigned all its training tasks, reduced staff gatherings and conferences, and carried out social distancing and isolation procedures for suspected cases.⁷ The PLA also implemented social distancing while continuing basic training in less affected areas. By reducing social interaction among the troops and resorting to online resources in teaching and training, the PLA was successful in integrating epidemic prevention and control protocols in its military training.

The challenge, however, was to balance the two contradictory tasks. The PLA's annual training tasks to increase combat readiness through training based on actual combat conditions require multi-level interaction and gathering of troops. The CMC's decision to implement epidemic prevention and control protocols in military training would require the opposite. Depending on the individual units and command structures, the CMC allowed flexibility in modifying the training. For instance, the PLA Navy Shandong aircraft carrier adopted "small and professional *concentrated* training and large professional *group* training" that involved protecting the officers and men of the warship⁸ (emphasis added). Meanwhile, a few military units had taken measures to continue basic and group training, and by only reducing certain large-scale manoeuvres.⁹

In addition, the CMC suspended the 2020 Conscription and Recruitment exercise, which is usually carried out with great fanfare and advertisement. Therefore, the PLA was determined to project its ability to keep its troops free from the infection as a sign of its military superiority in deftly managing its resources during a crisis.¹⁰ For instance, while the US aircraft carriers were reported to have infected soldiers, the Chinese Liaoning carrier group passed the Miyako Strait to highlight the PLA's success in tackling the pandemic without impinging on its deployment patterns.¹¹

Overall, the PLA's implementation of surveillance measures and epidemic control procedures in all military units, and setting up of mobile units and the centralised

⁶ **"Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference on February 28, 2020"**, *Chinese Ministry of Defence*, February 28, 2020.

⁷ Li Xi and Dai Zongfeng, **"Upsurge in Troop Training and Military Preparedness, To Fight Against Epidemic and No Relaxation in the Prevention and Control of the Epidemic on the War Preparation"** (掀起练兵备战热潮 | 抗疫不误战斗力 防控不松战备弦), *Zhongguo Junfang Zonghe*, February 17, 2020.

⁸ **"How Will the Military Achieve Both Military Training and Epidemic Prevention?"** (军队如何做到练兵与防疫“两不误”), *Zhongguo Xinwenwang*, March 01, 2020.

⁹ Cheng Xinan and Deng Jiewen, **"Scientific Organisation and Training in the Prevention and Epidemic Control in 74 Group Army Brigade"** (第74集团军某旅疫情防控期科学组织训练), *PLA Daily*, March 06, 2020. Also, see Chen Jian, Li Chuansai and Wang Zizhao, **"War is Not Disgraceful, Ready to Fight – Information on Actively Organising Military Training During an Epidemic Outbreak in Joint Logistics Support Force Base in Yunnan"** (战“疫”不辱 战备不负——联勤保障部队驻滇某基地疫情期间积极组织军事训练见闻), *China Military Online*, February 27, 2020.

¹⁰ **"China Confirms No Cases of Coronavirus Infection in the Military"**, *China Military Online*, March 03, 2020.

¹¹ **"Aircraft Carrier Group's Voyage Shows PLA Navy's Great Job in Virus Control"**, *Global Times*, April 12, 2020.

command system to monitor officers and personnel and their family members to check the infection spread, has been effective. These elaborate measures under the joint operations command at each theatre command has ensured that the PLA is more coordinated in its actions than ever before.

PLA Assumes Control of Emergency Operations

The PLA spearheaded China's emergency operations including the supply of medical equipment and staff, epidemic control and prevention protocols in localities of the outbreak, and vaccine development.¹² Though the PLA Logistics Support Department was among the several agencies deployed by the central leadership for combating COVID-19, yet among the CMC departments it took upon a leading role.¹³ The Joint Defence and Joint Control Mechanism (国务院联防联控机制) and the National Health Commission (NHC) of the State Council, created by bringing 32 departments under one umbrella, together formed the principal agency that spearheaded the response to COVID-19.¹⁴ The NHC assembled this central mechanism after concluding that mistakes were made in Wuhan due to 'ineffective implementation'.

The CMC departments, such as, the Health Bureau of the Logistics Support Department (中央军委后勤保障部卫生局), the Comprehensive Planning Bureau (综合计划局) of the CMC Logistics Support Department, and Transportation and Delivery Bureau of the CMC Logistics Support Department (中央军委后勤保障部运输投送局), aided the central team. According to a PLA Academy of Military Sciences scholar, the military has additional resources, it is willing to take risks and is highly coordinated in its ability to respond to crisis situations. These factors led to the Chinese military taking an active role in the fight against COVID-19.¹⁵

The PLA's emergency operations involved responding to the extent of aid that the outbreak areas need to defeat the infection. Initially, on January 24, 2020, the PLA Air Force sent 1,600 medics to Wuhan, but by February, it had transported 6,600 specialists to the epicentre from seven cities, including Urumqi, Shenyang, and

¹² **"Transcripts of the Press Conference of Army's Support to Local Fight Against Covid-19"** (军队支援地方抗击新冠肺炎疫情新闻发布会文字实录), *Xinhua*, March 02, 2020.

¹³ Some of them are from NHC, Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the CPC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, Ministry of Transportation, China State Railway Group Company (SoE), Ministry of Information and Technology, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, State Administration for Market Regulation, Ministry of Ecology and Environment, Civil Aviation Administration of China, National Forestry and Grassland Administration, China Food and Drug Administration, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Red Cross Society of China, etc.

¹⁴ Wang Bingyang, **"The National Health Commission with Relevant Departments under Joint Defence and Joint Control Mechanism Comprehensively Respond to the Covid-19 Infection"** (国家卫生健康委会同相关部门联防联控 全力应对新型冠状病毒感染的), *Xinhua*, January 22, 2020.

¹⁵ Liu Liu, **"What Role Does the Military Play in the Covid-19 Crisis?"** (军队在应对新冠肺炎疫情中有什么作用?), *The Paper*, March 31, 2020.

Chengdu.¹⁶ The PLA, therefore, recalibrated its response based on the evolving needs of the city such as the growing patient surges and shortage of medical staff. For instance, the CMC Logistics Support Department's direction to the PLA Air Force to deploy its Y-20 transport aircraft to send military medics and materials to Wuhan reflected the assessments on the ground. These adjustments were made once the military assessed the crisis at the frontline and determined that the epidemic was more infectious than previously estimated. The military sent fresh reinforcements, especially military medics, taken from "all branches of the military and theatre commands".¹⁷

Interestingly, these joint operations were carried out by coordinating medical supplies from different military units and commands, based on the evolving requirements. For example, in Wuhan, which comes under the purview of the PLA Central Theatre Command, the military had directly sent 8,500 tonnes of household goods and 23,600 pieces (sets) of protective materials and equipment to Wuhan using 130 transport vehicles.¹⁸ This is in addition to the military's allocation of 4,00,000 medical masks, 8,000 personal protection equipment (PPE) and isolation cabins. Once the epidemic had spread and the scale became more apparent, 28 (provincial) military districts allowed their soldiers to aid local authorities in managing disinfection duties, transport requirements, and curbing the epidemic propaganda.¹⁹ At times, certain theatre commands also assisted the other theatre commands. For example, the PLA Eastern Theatre Command's General Hospital sent multiple medical assistance teams to the People's Hospital in Amdo County in Tibet, which is part of the Western Theatre Command.

More than the contribution of medical supplies and equipment, it is the on-ground coordination along with medical assistance that has been the backbone of PLA's response. These measures were carried out in an atmosphere of 'war conditions', as evident from President Xi Jinping's usage of wartime language to describe the COVID-19 situation. He compared the fight against the pandemic to a 'battlefield'.²⁰

Notably, the need to ensure effective coordination in logistics in Wuhan necessitated a frontline command. This led to the Army Frontline Command and Coordination Group (军队前方指挥协调组) being sent to Wuhan. The Group coordinated the response of different agencies and personnel, including a meticulous selection of

¹⁶ "11 transport aircraft of PLA Air Force send medics to Wuhan", *Xinhua*, February 13, 2020. Also, see "Joint Defence and Joint Control Mechanism Introduce Military Support to Support the Local Fight Against Covid-19 Epidemic Situation" (国务院联防联控机制介绍军队支援地方抗击疫情情况), *Zhongguo Xinwenwang*, March 01, 2020.

¹⁷ Minnie Chan, "Chinese Military Sends in Fresh Medical Crews to Coronavirus-Hit Wuhan", *South China Morning Post*, February 13, 2020.

¹⁸ Li Ruyi, "Central Theatre Command Military Vehicles and Helicopters Support Wuhan by Sending 8500 tonnes of Supplies" (中部战区军车、直升机支援武汉, 运送物资超 8500 吨), *The Paper*, March 02, 2020.

¹⁹ *Xinhua*, no.12.

²⁰ Yang Lu, "Military Language Effect in Epidemic Prevention and Control" (疫情防控中的“军语效”), *Xueshi Shibao*, April 13, 2020.

experts from the PLA General Hospital and the Huashenshan Hospital for joint consultations.²¹

The PLA directly assumed control of the hospitals to treat infected patients. One of them was the Huashenshan Hospital in Wuhan, where 1,400 military medics initially treated the infected patients.²² According to a report, “majority of these medics – 950 – are from hospitals administered by the PLA Joint Logistic Support Force and another 450 are with the PLA Ground Force Medical University, the PLA Navy Medical University and the PLA Air Force Medical University. Fifteen experts from the PLA Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the PLA Academy of Military Science’s Military Medical Institute were part of professional consultation.”²³ In addition, 63 military hospitals had set up nearly 3,000 beds to treat patients suffering from COVID-19, with over 10,000 military medics working at the frontline.²⁴ Apart from the Huashenshan Hospital, two additional hospitals – Taikang Tongji Hospital and Guanggu Branch of Hubei Maternity and Child Health Care Hospital, came under the direct control of the PLA.

The CMC ordered the Chinese military to strengthen its medical research on developing an anti-coronavirus vaccine once the genome structure was sequenced, apart from building diagnostic capabilities. The PLA Logistics Support Department and the Beijing Municipal Health Commission approved the Clinical Laboratory Medical Centre of the 5th Medical Centre of the PLA General Hospital’s Clinical Laboratory Medical Centre to conduct and confirm COVID-19 diagnosis in the PLA. The laboratory was responsible for screening suspected patients and determining whether infected patients could be discharged from hospitals and provided laboratory indicators. For instance, mobile teams were able to collect up to 90 samples within half an hour.²⁵

The AMMS was tasked with finding the cure for the virus. Major General Chen Wei of AMMS had been leading the research on developing a vaccine after a team arrived in Wuhan. One of the first breakthroughs was the development of the “subunit vaccine” which contained only a fragment of the pathogen as opposed to a live-attenuated vaccine.²⁶ It could help in stimulating a protective immune response. Since then, Wei’s team has been developing an adenovirus vector vaccine, which is currently under clinical trials. The first phase of the clinical trial was completed at

²¹ Sun Xingwei, **“Army Frontline Command and Coordination Group Organised Experts To Go To Huoshenshan Hospital for Consultation”** (军队前方指挥协调组组织专家赴火神山医院会诊), *PLA Daily*, February 15, 2020.

²² **“PLA medical personnel to run new Wuhan hospital”**, *China Daily*, February 02, 2020.

²³ Sun Xingwei, no. 21.

²⁴ Chen Zhuo, **“Over 10, 000 Military Medics Working at Frontline in Covid-19 Fight”**, *Xinhua*, March 02, 2020.

²⁵ Sun Li and Zhang Zhangwei, no. 1.

²⁶ **“Subunit Vaccine Against Covid-19 Approved for Clinical Trials”**, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC*, March 17, 2020.

the end of March, and the second phase started on April 12, 2020.²⁷ Thus, the AMMS benefitted from Xi Jinping's growing emphasis on strengthening civil-military integration in the technology space.²⁸

Ensuring Military Readiness

The pandemic has indeed influenced the training activities and combat exercises of the PLA. Hence, the central leadership had tasked the PLA to ensure that its military readiness was not affected. China's repeated warnings and military actions reveal that its perceived adversaries might use the pandemic to their advantage. As a result, the PLA has been carrying out deterrence operations in potential areas of conflict to signal China's adversaries that its combat readiness remains unaffected due to the pandemic. The PLA Logistics Support Department, for instance, took pains to explain that the emergency procedures and disaster relief operations carried out by the military were not 'special' or 'out of character'. The PLA wanted to convey the message that these emergency operations did not divert its manpower or focus away from credible threats. China has labelled them as "Military Operations Other Than War" (MOOTW) as part of "diversified military tasks" and believed that it would push their combat readiness higher.²⁹ China's MOOTW operations developed as a result of its desire to tackle non-traditional threats such as terrorism, disaster rescue, piracy, peacekeeping and others, given its expanded interests. It also provided an avenue for China to use its military assets and training in operations carried out under the cover of MOOTW.

China also highlighted its military readiness by categorising the epidemic to a threat level designed for war and a severe natural disaster.³⁰ It directed the CMC to test the joint command system and joint capabilities (emergency preparedness management).³¹ The centralised mechanism allowed the leadership to use its crisis management initiatives to stress-test the system and assess the country's governance capability as well as the PLA to align its response in line with the leadership's objectives.³²

²⁷ Zhang Zhenwei and Shao Longfei, **"Our Country's Recombinant Adenovirus Vector Vaccine Has First Entered Second Phase of Clinical Trials"** (我国腺病毒载体重组新冠病毒疫苗率先进入二期临床试验), *PLA Daily*, April 15, 2020.

²⁸ Joel Wuthnow, **"China's New Academy of Military Science: A Revolution in Theoretical Affairs?"**, *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, 19 (2), January 18, 2019.

²⁹ **"Military Readiness High During Virus Battle, China Military Online"**, *China Military Online*, March 03, 2020.

³⁰ **"Transcripts of the Press Conference of Army's Support to Local Fight Against Covid-19"** (军队支援地方抗击新冠肺炎疫情新闻发布会文字实录), *Xinhua*, March 02, 2020.

³¹ Wang Xinjuan, **"Anti-Pandemic Fight Tests PLA's Emergency Response Capability"**, *China Military Online*, April 09, 2020.

³² Duan Jiangshan, **"White Gown Combatants See Real Battle"** (白衣作战袍烈火见真金), *Guanming Daily*, April 30, 2020.

One way for China to prove military readiness is to conduct deterrence operations and communicate its resolve. For example, the PLA Navy conducted drills in the South China Sea with surface vessels, submarine and various other naval assets in response to the presence of the US destroyer in Xisha Islands and American expeditionary strike group joint exercises.³³ Similarly, the PLA Navy began “combat readiness patrol” on February 10, 2020 in response to what the Chinese Defence Ministry labelled as “Taiwan independence forces and their secessionist activities”.³⁴ The trigger was the US decision to sign the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act into a law on March 26, 2020.³⁵ China had earlier explicitly warned Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) “not to play with fire”. The renewed support of the international community for Taiwan’s membership in the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Taiwan’s criticism of the credibility of the WHO fuelled the fire. Thereafter, the PLA Eastern Theatre Command, responsible for the Taiwan Straits, carried out joint air and sea exercises.³⁶

These aggressive military responses have, undoubtedly, led to a tense situation in the region. However, the exercises were meant to convey to Taiwan to not perceive the pandemic as a chaotic and vulnerable period for the CPC and expand its international presence at the expense of its security. It was also meant to signal China’s adversaries, specifically the US, that any military action, especially patrolling or exercises in its core area of interests, would invite harsher Chinese response.

Future Challenges of Bio-Security

China’s COVID-19 crisis has underscored the emergence of biological threats as one of the key issues in the national security system. Experts in China believe that while the spread of the epidemic has been controlled, the national security apparatus is not well equipped with adequate infrastructure and legal instruments to efficiently deal with biological disasters or potential warfare based on biological threats. The Chinese believe that the pandemic has shown the need to pay more attention to non-traditional security threats as it might affect many facets of life.³⁷ Though military experts have been aware of such threats, with some such as Peng Guangqian having articulated the view that biological threats were a new type of warfare which may originate from bio-mutation or a vicious enemy, yet these threats had not become a

³³ **“Chinese Navy Holds Drills Amid US Violation”**, *Global Times*, April 02, 2020.

³⁴ **“Defense Ministry’s Regular Press Conference on February 28, 2020”**, *China Military Online*, March 01, 2020.

³⁵ **“Chinese PLA Holds ‘Regular’ Drills Near Taiwan in Preparation for Military Struggle: Experts”**, *Global Times*, April 10, 2020.

³⁶ **“PLA Conducts Joint Air Force Exercises Near Southeast of Taiwan Island”**, *CGTN*, February 11, 2020.

³⁷ Guo Anxuan, **“Deeply Study and Implement Comprehensive National Security Concepts, Prevent and Resolve Non-Traditional Security Threats”** (深入学习贯彻总体国家安全观 防范化解非传统安全风险), *Xinhua*, April 15, 2020.

national security priority. Guangqian even believed that the threat may not come with a formal declaration of war or a concrete battlefield, and may not even distinguish between military and civilian personnel.³⁸

China's plans to draft a biosecurity law and establish legal support to national biosecurity prompted it to study the American and international strategies to learn about bio-defence strategies.³⁹ A draft of China's biosecurity law was submitted to the legislature, and several issues were identified at the domestic level such as the organisation of personnel, diplomacy and national defence, and lack of an overall operational strategy.⁴⁰ The discussions in China point towards a permanent bio-defence force based on the country's COVID-19 experience. In future, the Chinese military would likely play a more decisive role in tackling emerging bio-threats. It is also likely to further develop its capabilities in dealing with non-traditional security threats.

The PLA's approach to COVID-19 has shown that the military reforms have immensely benefited their coordination and response. As China wishes to develop further on bio-security, the leadership appears committed to strengthening its capabilities and responses to non-traditional threats. However, be it traditional or non-traditional threats, combat readiness remains fundamental to the Chinese military. The COVID-19 pandemic has in fact intensified China's desire to maintain military preparedness and has strengthened its resolve to demonstrate it too.

³⁸ **“Establishment of National Defense Force on Bio-Security Urged Amid Covid-19 Outbreak”**, *Global Times*, March 02, 2020.

³⁹ Tian De-Qiao, Zhu Lian-hui, et al., “Analysis of Bio-Defence Funding in the US” (美国生物防御经费投入情况分析), *Military Medical Sciences*, 2013 (2), pp. 141-145. Also, see Zhang Xinmin, “Biological Defence in the 21st Century” (21 世纪的生物防御), *Foreign Defence Science and Technology Trends*, 2005 (4), pp. 16-24.

⁴⁰ Wang Xiaoli and Zhang Dongsheng, **“International Bio-Security Situation Facing 2035”** (面向 2035 年的国际生物安全形), *Xuexi Shibao*, December 20, 2019.

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