



What Zhang Youxia's Purge Could Mean for China's 21st Party Congress

Manoj Kewalramani



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *While the official line suggests that the downfall of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli is due to political corruption, embedded in the language are accusations of faction-building.*
- *The purge of a senior official like Zhang raises serious questions about the Chinese military's cohesion and combat capability, and is likely to breed a culture of mistrust and anxiety across the entire party-state ecosystem in the near term.*
- *In the long term, these purges will change the dynamics of civil–military relations in China, with implications for Xi Jinping's tenure and beyond.*

COMMENTARY

In late January, China's Ministry of National Defence [announced](#) that two of the country's leading military officials, Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia and Chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department Liu Zhenli, were under investigation as they were “suspected of serious violations of discipline and law”. In the Chinese system, Zhang was the highest-ranking professional soldier. The ouster of Zhang and Liu has left the CMC, China's highest military decision-making body, effectively at its thinnest, with just one other member besides Chinese President Xi Jinping.

A day after the revelation, the *PLA Daily* published an [editorial](#) detailing the charges against the two men. It claimed that the probe against Zhang and Liu was “a major achievement in the anti-corruption struggle of the Party and the military” and a

demonstration of the Party Central Committee's attitude of ensuring "no off-limit zones, full coverage, and zero tolerance" when it comes to corruption.

The editorial shed light on the specific charges against the duo. It claimed that they had "seriously trampled upon and undermined the CMC Chairman Responsibility System, fuelled political and corruption issues that affect the Party's absolute leadership over the military and endanger the Party's ruling foundation, affected the image and prestige of the CMC leadership team, and seriously impacted the political and ideological foundation of the unity and forge-ahead spirit of all officers and soldiers." In addition, it contended that their actions had "caused immense damage to the military's political construction, political ecology, and combat capability construction, and have had an extremely vile influence on the Party, the state, and the military."

Some [reportage](#) indicated that the charges against Zhang and Liu involve failures to rein in close associates, family members and relatives, as well as shortcomings in identifying and flagging problems in Party leadership at an early stage. Other [reports](#) argued that Zhang has been accused of leaking nuclear secrets to the United States. One line of assessment linked the probe to corruption tied to capability-building, arguing that the purge reflects performance failures as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) moves towards its centenary in 2027. In this view, Zhang's leadership did not deliver the results demanded. Another perspective has been that following the purge of CMC Vice Chairman He Weidong and Director of the Political Work Department Miao Hua in late 2025, which weakened or destroyed their factional networks within the PLA, Zhang may have emerged as the only remaining dominant power centre. This essentially painted a target on Zhang's back because, from Xi's standpoint, a single entrenched faction, even one led by someone considered to be a long-time ally, would be unacceptable if it created a potential counterweight to his authority.

If one is to go by the limited information available and the nature of the charges framed in the *PLA Daily* editorial, then it is evident that the downfall of Zhang and Liu is primarily a case of political corruption rather than professional or operational failure. In particular, the language around them undermining the [CMC Chairman Responsibility System](#) – which is an old concept but was codified in Party documents in 2017 – was indicative of the two men being charged for questioning Xi's authority. Embedded in the language are also accusations of faction-building, i.e., of exercising leadership through the cultivation of a political network that excluded or marginalised other groupings. For instance, the editorial argued that probing Zhang and Liu will allow the military to "rectify the roots and clarify the origins from a political perspective, eliminate toxins and malpractices from an ideological perspective, and remove rot to promote healing from an organisational perspective."

The purge of a senior official like Zhang will inevitably have downstream effects on the broader network of officers who have advanced under his watch and raises serious questions about the Chinese military's cohesion and combat capability. It is also likely to breed a culture of mistrust and anxiety across the entire party-state ecosystem. However, the most significant impact of the probe against Zhang is likely to be seen in personnel changes as the Communist Party heads into its 21st National Congress, scheduled for autumn 2027.



The removal of leading military officials will inevitably have downstream effects on the broader network of PLA officers. *Image source: Wikimedia Commons.*

By that time, Xi will be 74. It is widely expected that he will seek a fourth term as general secretary. If successful, he would effectively remain at the apex of the system until 2032. That outcome is entirely plausible. But it is not the only possibility. Other scenarios remain conceivable:

- Xi could remain in power, but have a successor who takes over the vice presidency and is tipped to take charge in 2032;
- He could anoint a successor and step out of the Politburo Standing Committee but retain a paramount, “chairman-like” role;
- He could step down from the presidency while remaining general secretary and CMC chairman;
- He could step down as general secretary and president but retain the CMC chair role;
- Some other form of hybrid arrangement could emerge.

In this context, it is important to think through how the purge of Zhang is likely to shape outcomes in 2027.

Zhang’s dismissal has, in effect, wiped the slate clean at the very top of the CMC. What will follow are new, younger appointees. Crucially, these officers are unlikely to have had the kind of personal connection with Xi that Zhang did. The social and political distance between Xi and the next generation of CMC leaders is, therefore, likely to be much greater. This has two implications.

First, these new appointees are far less likely to question Xi’s authority, resist his agenda or pose an independent political challenge. Zhang, after all, was a peer in some ways. He was older than Xi. He had combat experience and possessed the stature and institutional weight that come with that status. Second, while a younger and more deferential leadership may deliver compliance, it may also weaken policy debate and distort information flows upward. Xi may get decisiveness and loyalty, but potentially at the cost of candour and institutional feedback.

From a succession perspective, however, this trade-off may be precisely the point. If we assume that Xi begins to think seriously about managing a transition around or after 2027, the existence of a powerful peer-like figure at the top of the PLA would complicate that process. A figure like Zhang could, at least in theory, shape elite consensus, question the choice of successor, or act as a focal point for alternative preferences within the system.

By removing Zhang, Xi may have significantly reduced that risk. A newly constituted PLA leadership that is loyal to Xi personally, lacking peer status, and fragmented in terms of independent power would be far less capable of contesting his decisions. In that sense, Zhang's purge may not simply be about consolidating control in the present, but about pre-emptively managing the politics of succession in the future, such that when the time comes, the choice of successor, the terms of transition and the sequencing of roles remain firmly in Xi's hands.

Whoever Xi's eventual successor may be, that individual is almost certain to be politically far weaker than Xi himself. In that context, a politically powerful military leadership could pose a serious constraint, not just on the successor, but indirectly on Xi's ability to shape outcomes after stepping back. From this perspective, clearing the slate at the top of the PLA may serve a longer-term purpose of ensuring that the military does not emerge as an independent pole of power during or after a leadership transition. Seen this way, Zhang's removal may be an early signal that Xi is preparing the ground for a tense succession process.

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