



A New Milestone in China's Military Transformation

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By James Char

SYNOPSIS

With the latest phase of the People's Liberation Army anti-corruption campaign now completed, China's commander-in-chief finally has a freer hand to reshape the Chinese military.

COMMENTARY

Since China announced in late January that its top soldier, General Zhang Youxia, had been placed under investigation, few outside observers have grasped its full significance. More than just another headline in the decade-long anti-corruption campaign, Zhang's removal marks a new milestone in the evolution of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) transformation under Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Zhang's pedigree once made him seem untouchable. As the first-ranked vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), he was second only to Xi. Like his civilian commander-in-chief, Zhang shares the same revolutionary lineage with the scions of Red Army veterans who defeated the Kuomintang government in the CCP's northwestern bases during China's civil war. For Xi, targeting such a figure serves two purposes: first, to dispel once and for all persistent suspicions that his anti-graft campaign is a selective exercise that spares his closest associates; and second, to reaffirm that everyone, even members of China's red aristocracy, must serve at the pleasure of the supreme leader.

Zhang Youxia should have anticipated this following the fall of his protege, the former defence minister, Li Shangfu, in 2023. In the latter part of that year, Li was abruptly cashiered after the CMC Equipment Development Department (CMC EDD) announced on its *WeChat* account that it was looking into procurement violations dating back to 2017. This limited scrutiny was evidently aimed at Li as he was director of the CMC EDD from 2017 to 2022 – but spared his immediate predecessor, Zhang,

who led the same department from October 2012, when it was still known as the General Armaments Department before its rebranding under Xi's sweeping PLA reforms in late 2015.

Nevertheless, the January announcement surprised PLA watchers because Zhang and his fellow CMC member, General Liu Zhenli, chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department, had appeared publicly a few weeks earlier with their commander-in-chief. That this purge has happened now underscores the relentlessness that has come to define Xi Jinping's political calculus. Until his removal, Zhang Youxia was considered one of the key architects behind the PLA's modernisation efforts under Xi. A decorated combat veteran from the Third Indochina War, Zhang's career exemplified the professionalism his commander-in-chief claimed to promote. However, in China's New Era, it is increasingly apparent that competence alone offers little protection, with the very officers who had helped drive the PLA towards its "world-class" ambitions now facing the same fate as those cashiered before them.

The scale of the purges speaks for itself. Since Xi launched his signature campaign after the 18th Party Congress, over 200 senior officers at the "corps deputy leader" grade have been implicated. At the top, the PLA's highest decision-making body is now left with only one uniformed member: the new CMC vice-chairman, General Zhang Shengmin. Throughout the Chinese military, none of the remaining three-star generals are from the PLA Army. Nevertheless, the command system endures, now staffed by deputies and second-line officers awaiting new appointments ahead of the next Party Congress in 2027. This temporary arrangement will provide stability in the short term.

To Xi's supporters, not only has his rectification campaign restored purity to the CCP's armed wing, but the PLA will also be able to keep to its roadmap as articulated in Xi's two goals: to "basically" complete its modernisation by 2035, and to become a world-class military by mid-century. Given its history as a traditionally Army-centric armed forces, the removal of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli – both army generals – can only bolster Xi's efforts so far to improve PLA "jointness". Indeed, Zhang's downfall will adversely affect his immediate subordinates and their followers, as they are likely to be implicated. This could have far-reaching consequences, as many of them would otherwise have been primed for important posts. Even among those spared from the purges so far, they will probably be passed over for promotion.

Following from the pride of place accorded the Navy amidst Beijing's display of its "maritime power" ambitions over the past decade, the Air Force (PLAAF) appears to have regained Xi's favour with the appointment of several PLAAF personnel to key roles across China's Theater Commands and the CMC departments. It would be remiss to overlook that when Xi was finally able to decide on his own CMC leadership in October 2017, he chose the now-deceased PLAAF leader, General Xu Qiliang, as his first-ranked deputy. Accordingly, Xi also relied on the PLAAF for his personal security detail during his first few years as China's top leader.

With the removal of the last senior military officer handpicked by Xi Jinping for higher office completed, China's commander-in-chief now has a clean slate to reshape the PLA in his own strongman image. Yet despite how his continuing purges may keep

PLA leaders loyal, they will also be nervous and uncertain at the same time. Therefore, whereas some have speculated that the purges have paralysed PLA command-and-control for contingencies such as a potential Taiwan Strait crisis, the real danger lies not in paralysis but in overcompensation. Eager to demonstrate loyalty and initiative, newly promoted Chinese generals may interpret Xi's strategic cues with excessive zeal – not restraint.

Finding the right balance between “red” and “expert” remains undoubtedly critical. If done poorly, Xi may discover that in a crisis, loyalty – although useful as a political tool for effective rule – is a poor substitute for military competence.

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