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The Hollow Crown

What Xi's Purges Reveal—and Conceal—About China's Military

By J. Ken Rhodes

In late January 2026, General Zhang Youxia—the first-ranked vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, the most senior uniformed officer in the People's Liberation Army, and, by most accounts, Xi Jinping's closest military ally—vanished from public view. Within days, Beijing confirmed that Zhang and General Liu Zhenli, the PLA's top operational commander, had been placed under investigation for “serious violations of discipline and law.”¹

Zhang's fall was the most consequential blow to the Chinese military leadership since the Lin Biao affair of 1971. He was the second sitting CMC vice chairman to be purged in four months, after He Weidong in October 2025—and only the second since 1967. The two removals left the commission with just two members: Xi himself and a single newly promoted vice chairman. By the count of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, more than a hundred senior officers have now been purged or placed under suspicion since 2022, roughly half the military's top leadership. The campaign has consumed a defense minister, a foreign minister, and nearly the entire command of the Rocket Force, the branch that controls China's nuclear and conventional missiles.²

The instinct in Washington is to read this as good news—proof that the PLA is too rotten to fight, that the Taiwan threat is overstated, that the rising power is a paper tiger after all. That reading is comforting and

¹China's Ministry of National Defense announced on January 24, 2026, that the Central Committee had approved investigations into Generals Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli for suspected “serious violations of discipline and law.” Zhang, the first-ranked vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, was China's most senior uniformed officer; Liu was chief of staff of the Joint Staff Department. The two had been absent from a January 20 ministerial study session, triggering speculation days before the confirmation.

²Center for Strategic and International Studies, “The Purges Within China's Military Are Even Deeper Than You Think,” ChinaPower, April 2026. CSIS counts 36 generals and lieutenant generals officially purged since 2022, with at least 46 additional general officers absent from key events in 2025 alone—yielding the higher “more than a hundred” potential-and-confirmed figure widely cited. The 52-percent-of-top-leadership estimate appears in CSIS analysis reported by NBC News, February 26, 2026.

wrong. But the opposite reading, increasingly common among serious analysts, is also incomplete. In these pages last summer, the political scientist M. Taylor Fravel cautioned that purges tell us little about readiness and that China's leaders might choose war even when their forces are unprepared. He is right that purges are a poor thermometer for capability. Yet both the optimistic and the cautious readings share a hidden assumption: that the purges are fundamentally a story about whether the PLA can fight. They are not. They are a story about whether Xi Jinping can believe what his own military tells him—and about the structural reason a Party-first army produces a commander who cannot.³

Begin with what the PLA actually is, because it is routinely misdescribed even by those who know better. It is not China's army in the way the United States Army belongs to the United States. It is the armed wing of the Communist Party, and the distinction is not rhetorical housekeeping. Recruits swear loyalty to the Party, not to a constitution or a nation. Every unit above the company level carries a political commissar whose duty is to guarantee ideological reliability. The force's founding and recurring purpose is to keep the Party in power—a purpose made literal in 1989, when PLA units were marched into Beijing to clear Tiananmen Square. Fighting a foreign adversary is a genuine mission, but it has never been the only one, and never the organizing one.

This much is the first page of the field; no China specialist needs to be told it. What is less often carried to its conclusion is the institutional consequence. When an organization's primary product is demonstrated political loyalty rather than battlefield performance, its internal incentives bend to match. Promotion rewards reliability over competence. Procurement becomes a patronage economy in which contracts are currency and kickbacks are the toll of doing business. Exercises drift toward the theatrical—optimized for the footage that reassures superiors rather than the friction that would expose what does not work. None of this means the force cannot fight. It means that the signals the system generates about itself—the readiness reports, the promotion records, the parade-ground perfection—are systematically unreliable, and unreliable in a particular direction: they flatter. The rot is not that the army is weak. The rot is that no one inside it has an incentive to say so.

³M. Taylor Fravel, "Is China's Military Ready for War? What Xi's Purges Do—and Don't—Mean for Beijing's Ambitions," *Foreign Affairs*, July 18, 2025.

That is the hinge of the argument, and it is where the purges acquire their meaning. Xi is not purging the PLA because he has concluded, in the abstract, that it is weak. He is purging it because he has learned, repeatedly and at the highest levels, that he cannot trust what it reports. The campaign that began in 2023 started with whistleblower complaints about corrupt procurement in the Equipment Development Department reaching back years. What it surfaced was not a handful of corrupt officers but a system: a Rocket Force whose paper readiness and actual readiness had quietly diverged, amid persistent reports—uncorroborated by Beijing, but consistent with the procurement findings—of substandard equipment and falsified maintenance. A leader who has staked his legitimacy on a military capable of taking Taiwan by 2027 cannot govern a force whose own books are cooked. So he does the only thing a Leninist system equips him to do.⁴

Here is the constraint that separates China from an ordinary state confronting institutional failure. Where there are independent courts, a free press, and a legislature with subpoena power, military failure produces hearings, audits, and the slow machinery of accountability. The failure is named, dissected, and sometimes fixed. The Party cannot follow that path, because to follow it would mean conceding in public that the institution charged with guaranteeing the Party's survival is hollow—that the propaganda of inexorable national rejuvenation has been papering over rot. So failure cannot be processed as failure. It must be reprocessed as betrayal. The problem is never the system; it is always the disloyal officials who corrupted an otherwise sound system. The remedy is never structural reform, which would require admitting a structural problem; the remedy is removal, which confirms that the structure was sound and merely infiltrated.

This is why the purges operate as theater even when the corruption they target is real—and it is real. The two facts that outside observers keep treating as rival explanations are in truth a single mechanism. The corruption is genuine; the purge is also a performance, and each removal carries a message pitched at two audiences. To the public it says: the

⁴The investigation that became the broader purge began in July 2023, when the CMC Equipment Development Department solicited whistleblower reports on corrupt procurement dating to 2017. The first casualties were Rocket Force commander Li Yuchao and, later, Defense Minister Li Shangfu. Reports of substandard equipment and fuel irregularities in the Rocket Force have circulated in outlets including Bloomberg; specific claims remain uncorroborated by Beijing and should be treated as allegations consistent with the procurement-corruption findings rather than as confirmed fact.

Party is vigilant, the diseased tissue has been excised, the body is sound. To the officer corps it says something colder—that no one is safe, that loyalty is the only insurance, and that the surest way to survive is to tell superiors what they wish to hear. The second message corrodes the first. A command culture in which candor about weakness ends careers is a command culture that manufactures the very false readiness reports that made the purges necessary in the first place. The cure feeds the disease.

If that mechanism is real, the most revealing purge should be one in which an officer was removed not for stealing but for telling the truth. There is reason to think the Zhang Youxia case may be exactly that. The official charge against Zhang and Liu was framed in unusual language—undermining the “Chairman responsibility system,” Xi’s mechanism of personal command—notably different from the procurement-corruption charges leveled at He Weidong and Li Shangfu. Several analysts read the underlying offense as professional rather than venal: that Zhang, one of the few serving Chinese generals with actual combat experience, had judged the 2027 Taiwan timeline unrealistic and favored something closer to 2035, and that he and Liu had resisted directives they assessed as militarily reckless. One think tank titled its analysis of the affair “Command without Trust.”⁵

That interpretation should be held at arm’s length—it rests partly on leaks and partly on sources hostile to Beijing, and the truth inside a black box is unknowable from outside. But note that it does not weaken the thesis; it sharpens it to a point. If the most senior professional soldier in China, a man with genuine battlefield experience, was removed in part for delivering an honest assessment that his commander did not wish to hear, then the system is not merely tolerating the suppression of bad news. It is enforcing it at the very top, against exactly the officer best placed to know. A military that purges its corrupt officers is cleaning house. A military that purges its honest ones is blinding itself.

⁵The contested interpretation rests on reporting that the charges against Zhang and Liu—framed as undermining the “CMC Chairman responsibility system”—differed in language from the corruption charges against He Weidong and Li Shangfu, and that the two had resisted directives they judged unrealistic, including the 2027 Taiwan-readiness timeline. This reading draws partly on sources hostile to Beijing and on uncorroborated leaks; it is presented here as one credible interpretation among several, not as established fact. See discussion in ISDP, “Command without Trust” (February 2026), and contemporaneous reporting.

Notice now what this argument does and does not claim, because this is where most commentary on the PLA goes wrong in one direction or the other. It does not claim that China's military is weak. That would be foolish. The PLA Navy is the largest in the world by hull count, with roughly 395 battle-force ships against fewer than 300 for the United States, and Chinese shipbuilding capacity is estimated at more than two hundred times America's by tonnage. In November 2025 Beijing commissioned the Fujian, its first carrier with electromagnetic catapults—a capability the U.S. Navy fielded only a few years earlier. China's nuclear arsenal is expanding faster than any other power's. These are not the instruments of a paper tiger. They are the instruments of a heavily armed great power that cannot fully trust its own chain of command—which is the more dangerous condition, not the less.⁶

A weak military invites caution in the man who owns it. A powerful military riddled with distrust invites miscalculation. Xi may act on readiness reports he half-suspects are inflated, and move before the force is ready. Or, having spent three years discovering that he cannot believe his commanders, he may conclude that the rot is spreading faster than he can cut it—and that a closing window of relative strength must be used before it shuts. The argument here makes no prediction that purges push toward war or away from it. It makes a darker claim: that they corrode the information a leader needs to judge the question at all. The most destabilizing fact about the PLA in 2026 is not that it is hollow, and not that it is formidable. It is that Beijing itself may no longer be able to tell which.

An argument that explains every possible outcome explains nothing, so it is worth stating plainly what would show this one to be wrong. If the optimistic view is correct—that purges signal terminal weakness—Chinese external behavior should grow visibly more cautious as the campaign deepens: fewer incursions into Taiwan's air-defense identification zone, reduced pressure in the South China Sea, a quiet retreat from the timeline. If Fravel's caution is the whole story, the purges should leave both capability and assertiveness essentially unchanged. The reading

⁶Per the U.S. Naval Institute and the 2025 Department of Defense China Military Power Report, the PLA Navy operates roughly 395 battle-force ships against fewer than 300 for the U.S. Navy. The Office of Naval Intelligence has estimated Chinese shipbuilding capacity at more than 200 times that of the United States by tonnage. China commissioned the Fujian, its first carrier with electromagnetic catapults, in November 2025.

offered here predicts a third pattern: continued or intensified external assertiveness running alongside visible internal churn, because the nationalist bluster does domestic work—shoring up legitimacy as growth slows—that is largely decoupled from what the force can actually do on a given Tuesday. Through early 2026, it is the third pattern the evidence fits. Should Chinese behavior turn sharply and durably cautious, this argument should lose confidence accordingly. That is the test, and I am content to be held to it.

There is even a hint that the machine is straining against itself. When the National People's Congress Standing Committee convened twice in early February 2026, it conspicuously declined to take the procedural step of stripping Zhang and Liu of their delegate status—ordinarily a prerequisite to formal prosecution. Analysts disagree about what the delay means, and it may mean little. But it is at least consistent with the possibility that even a leader who can make the second-most-powerful soldier in the country disappear cannot always make the apparatus ratify it on command. Absolute power that must keep purging is not the same thing as absolute control. It is closer to its opposite.⁷

For Washington, the implication is neither reassurance nor alarm but humility about what is knowable. Policymakers should resist treating each new purge as a markdown on the China threat, and resist with equal firmness the assumption that the buildup proceeds frictionlessly behind the headlines. Both errors flow from the same mistake: reading an opaque, Party-first institution as though it produced the honest signals a Western military does. It does not, and it cannot—because the very feature that makes the PLA useful to the Party, its subordination of competence to loyalty, is the feature that blinds the Party to the army's true condition. The right posture toward such an adversary is not confidence that it is weak, nor fear that it is strong, but sober preparation for an actor whose own self-knowledge is degraded.

Xi Jinping is attempting something close to impossible: to build a military capable of winning a great-power war while keeping it absolutely obedient to one man, and to scrub out the corruption that absolute obedience

⁷On the National People's Congress Standing Committee convening on February 2 and February 4, 2026, without formally acting to strip Zhang and Liu of delegate status—a procedural step ordinarily required before formal prosecution—see contemporaneous reporting and analysis from late January through February 2026. The significance of the delay is disputed among analysts.

breeds without ever conceding that the corruption is systemic. The purges are the visible stress fractures of that contradiction, and they will not stop, because the conditions that produce them have not changed and cannot change without changing the regime itself. The Party projects strength because it cannot survive the appearance of weakness; when the military fails, it removes officials to preserve the illusion of control rather than to repair the rot beneath it. That is not the conduct of a confident rising power. It is the conduct of a crown grown too heavy for the head beneath it—and a reminder that the most dangerous adversary is not always the strongest, but is sometimes the one that has lost the ability to see itself clearly.