

Xi's Purge and the War Over Taiwan

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Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia's expulsion from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was politically motivated; Chairman Xi Jinping's purge of the PLA high command is best explained by his dissatisfaction with senior officers' assessments of an operation against Taiwan and their willingness to act on Xi's orders. The Fujian-based generals Xi once trusted most, as well as the leadership of the Equipment Development Department and Rocket Force, and Zhang himself shared a professional caution about a cross-Straits war. Xi appears to have read their warnings as cowardice and resistance to the 2027 military readiness goal. The purge shows political will emphasized over military professionalism. Military conflict is less likely in the short term while new officers enter their posts, but gray-zone pressure will likely escalate. A leadership consisting of compliant subordinates makes war increasingly likely over time.

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Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia's (张又侠) time as Xi Jinping's number two at the top of the Chinese military came to an end at the beginning of 2026. It was only in late September, however, that he was finally expelled from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Zhang, whose political failings were put front and center in the official announcement of his purge, is now set for a military prosecution (Xinhua, September 21; China Brief, September 23).

The official record divulges little information about the precise nature of Zhang's crimes—political or otherwise. Part of what makes it so difficult to uncover the facts of his case is that the official record itself is unreliable. The Party's pronouncements follow a logic of their own, and truth is far from a necessary criterion.

The initial notice announcing that Zhang was under investigation was followed by an editorial in the *PLA Daily* that accused Zhang of being involved in five offenses. These included gravely betraying the trust and heavy responsibilities placed on him by the Party Central Committee and the CMC, severely trampling upon and undermining the CMC Chairman responsibility system, and seriously fueling political and corruption problems (*PLA Daily*, January 25). The seriousness of these offenses indicated that corruption alone could not have been the root cause of the accusations. As the September announcement now suggests, Zhang's crimes were ultimately political in nature.

Mass Purges are a Response to Political Crimes

Xi is not the first to remove disagreeable generals before forging ahead with hostilities. In 1938, for example, Adolf Hitler used the Blomberg-Fritsch affair—a scandal that was partly real and partly concocted—to reshuffle his high command and accrue more direct power over the military. Xi is also not the only PRC leader to do so, either. In 1962, Mao elected to attack India, not long after a shake up of the PLA high command following the dismissal of Peng Dehuai (彭德怀), his top military officer throughout the 1950s (*Foreign Affairs*, July 18, 2025).

The Party leadership's most prominent purge of senior People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers for political crimes took place between June 1989 and mid-1992, following the Tiananmen Square Massacre, when the CMC purged or sidelined key generals who had initially opposed the intervention, replaced six of the seven military region commanders, and engineered a complete

turnover of PLA representation on the Central Committee (People's Daily, November 10, 1989; CSIS, February 24). **[1]** Some research indicates that an estimated 3,500 PLA officers were purged for disobeying orders (Wall Street Journal, October 9, 1991). **[2]** Only political reasons could have driven such a large purge.

General Secretary Xi Jinping's similarly dramatic purge appears likewise to have been motivated by political factors. In his case, the most likely explanation for his actions is dissatisfaction over both the readiness and willingness of senior officers to stage operations targeting Taiwan. Unification with Taiwan has been of central importance to Xi since he first came to power. From the start, his principal political objective, which he referred to as the "China dream" (中国梦), had subsuming Taiwan as its main military component. Responsibility for that component of Xi's agenda falls principally on the PLA. The enormous reforms he launched to both the military and other Party and state institutions during his first term, and his successful efforts to amend the constitution and allow for indefinite tenure as state president, were intended to mobilize the entire system toward the achievement of this primary political objective. **[3]**

The massive purges seen throughout the PLA in recent years very likely relate to what Xi views as a lack of meaningful progress toward attaining this goal, as others have argued (China Brief, January 26; AEI, January 28; CSIS, February 24). They began in the early days of Xi's PLA reforms with the removal of those who opposed his agenda, such as the CMC vice chairs Guo Boxiong (郭 boxiong) and Xu Caihou (徐 caihou) (The Diplomat, April 7, 2016). These were followed by the discovery of corruption issues within the Equipment Development Department (EDD) and the Rocket Force during efforts to improve capabilities for a Taiwan scenario.

The larger-scale purge that occurred subsequently was driven more by political and military strategy than by issues with reform and corruption. Since 2022, 36 PLA generals and lieutenant generals have been formally purged, while another 65 high-ranking officers have disappeared from public view or may have faced purges (CSIS, February 24). Of the seven members of the CMC present at the end of 2022, besides Xi Jinping only one remains.

Xi Seeks Less Cautious Generals

The purge of Zhang and other senior figures most likely represented a clash between Xi's political strategy and a military community that was cautious about a potential war over Taiwan. When the absolute authority of a Leninist party comes into conflict with the physical realities of modern, professional warfare, this is the only possible resolution if the regime is to persist (China Brief, January 26, February 11).

Many believe that former CMC vice chairman He Weidong (何 weidong) and officers from the former 31st Group Army were Xi's most trusted allies in the PLA (The Diplomat, October 20, 2025). Based in Fujian, Xi came to know them during his nearly 20 years working in the province. If they had been involved in corruption alone, Chinese political tradition indicates that they would likely have received only light punishment, not the unusually harsh treatment that ended up being administered.

Those closest to the Taiwan Strait best understand the hard military realities, unlike the political officers in Beijing. They are aware of Taiwan's strong defensive advantages, such as its difficult terrain, dense anti-ship missiles, and air defenses. They also realize that huge air and sea superiority, as well as long supply lines, would be needed to land large forces successfully, and that U.S. and Japanese intervention, however brief, would cut off any PLA troops who managed to make it ashore. In other words, their caution comes from professional judgment (China Brief, March 20). When Xi demanded the PLA complete its preparation to attack Taiwan by 2027, the generals'

realistic assessments of high costs and risks sounded like fear and a lack of determination by Xi (U.S. Department of Defense, November 29, 2022).

Although Xi promoted these former Fujian subordinates because he thought they understood the Strait and would obey his command, he expected them to build a fast, powerful force using modern brigades that could quickly disable Taiwan. In a system that demands absolute loyalty, their subsequent claims of immature technology or a lack of readiness was reinterpreted as double-dealing and deliberate deception. Xi concluded that the generals never intended to fight and used professional concerns mainly to mask cowardice and protect themselves. This sense of betrayal was deeper than ordinary corruption, so no graceful exit was allowed (PLA Daily, October 18, 2025).

The final target, Zhang Youxia, shared key traits with the purged Fujian-faction generals on Taiwan strategy issues. As one of the few commanders who had actually led troops in battle, he had a deep, instinctive caution about the brutality of war and the gap between theory and real combat effectiveness (ISDP, January 30). When frontline Fujian generals—who had spent years war-gaming a Taiwan Strait landing—warned against hasty action based on professional judgment, Zhang agreed and supported them as a fellow professional soldier. Their shared caution about war became a common professional language (China Brief, January 26). They may have seen some of Xi's goals, including tight force-building timelines, as unrealistic, and resisted them on professional military grounds.

Analysts have speculated that part of Zhang's downfall could be attributed to his long stint as head of the CMC EDD, which appears to have been a locus of a high degree of corruption (Global Security/Zhang Youxia, accessed October 1). A more likely reason why this could be a contributing factor to his demise, however, is that the department fully adhered to Zhang's cautious stance, and many senior officials who were later purged, such as Li Shangfu (李尚福), were subordinates that Zhang had promoted during his tenure there. This led to a situation—that for Xi was unacceptable—in which officials in charge of weapons development (the EDD and Rocket Force), frontline combat preparation (Eastern Theater Command and Fujian faction), and overall military oversight (Zhang himself) developed a strong shared understanding of tactical pragmatism with regard to a possible Taiwan Strait war. Together, they were seen as systematically using technical excuses and equipment shortcomings to resist Xi's unification strategy passively.

A strong indicator of this is Zhang's assertion, in the pages of the *PLA Daily* in late 2025, that 2035, not 2027, would be the year by which the military would acquire all-domain operational capabilities (People's Daily, November 12, 2025; China Brief, January 26).

Conclusion

Xi's purge appears to be a decisive victory of political will over military professionalism. The removal of seasoned veterans who valued professional caution about war could lead to replacements who are less likely to push back on Xi's demands (CSIS, February 2024). This could propel the Taiwan Strait situation along a more dangerous path.

Though Xi's purge reduces the short-term probability of a kinetic conflict, as promoted officers familiarize themselves with their new billets, gray-zone warfare is likely to continue to escalate. The greatest danger is that the information cocoon created by submissive subordinates, coupled with Xi's arbitrary exercise of power, creates the conditions that make war across the Taiwan Strait increasingly likely once the new PLA leadership team is formed.

Notes

[1] As a victim of that purge, one of us can verify that it was indeed politically motivated (NYT, May 28, 2015; NYT Chinese Edition, May 29, 2019; NYT Chinese Edition, June 3, 2019). Numerous generals involved in defying the martial law order were sentenced, dismissed, or demoted—such as Xu Qinxian (许钦先), commander of the 38th Army (The Guardian, December 24, 2025), He Yanran (何颜然), Commander of the 28th Army (CND, December 31, 2025), Li Lianxiu (李联秀), Commander of the People's Armed Police Force (RFA, June 9, 2023), and Xu Feng (许峰), Commander of the 116th Division of the 39th Army (DW, June 4, 2018).

[2] Chong-Pin Lin. "China's Restive Army." *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 1991.

[3] For analysis of Xi's structural reforms to the military over the last decade, see: Miller, Frank, Tung Ho, Kenneth Allen, and Arran Hope, eds. *The People's Liberation Army as Organization Volume 3.0*. Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation; Vienna: Exovera, 2025.

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