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China, the PLA and Xi's ongoing purges: The corruption conundrum

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CIGI Papers No. 344 – December 2025

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CMC	Central Military Commission
EDD	Equipment Development Department
NPC	National People's Congress
PAP	People's Armed Police
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	PLA Air Force
PLAGF	PLA Ground Forces
PLAN	PLA Navy
PLARF	PLA Rocket Force
PRC	People's Republic of China
S&T	science and technology

Executive Summary

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Chinese President Xi Jinping's long-standing and ongoing purges of the senior leadership in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), part of a larger campaign to cement a personalist, centralized system of control over the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and to reassert party authority over all aspects of the state and society. Various motivations underpin Xi's actions, including ensuring the PLA's complete subservience and loyalty, concerns over financial corruption and growing doubts about the combat readiness of China's military. Despite more than a decade of continual prosecutions, the recent purging of some of the purportedly most loyal generals and admirals to Xi demonstrates continued deep institutional weaknesses and factionalism within the PLA, and that Xi continues to not wield complete authority over the institution. The persistence of such issues also raises questions about the PLA's operational coherence and its strategic reliability for the CCP more generally, both as a major element of and enabler furthering China's superpower ambitions, and, more importantly, effectively serving as the force of last resort in ensuring the CCP's survival in the face of potential internal or external challenges to its legitimacy. In short, these entrenched leadership issues have significant implications for assessing China's intentions and capabilities regarding Taiwan, in conjunction with more commonly used tangible metrics such as weapons development, force projection measures, grey-zone tactics, and science and technology (S&T) innovations, as well as operational experience. This paper deepens the understanding of China's military-political dynamics and argues that while Beijing's rhetoric and threats of action against Taiwan remain aggressive, its actual willingness to initiate conflict may be more constrained than often predicted due to leadership issues. CCP-PLA relations in this age of persistent purges are a critical area for continued study, and a potential core indicator informing scenario considerations, the shaping of strategic responses and regional deterrence planning.

Introduction

On September 3, 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping's stake in presiding over a massive military parade to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of China's victory over Japan in the Second World War (flanked by Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un) was visible for the world to see. A red-carpet affair, the event was highly symbolic and displayed pageantry at its best. The message to all was clear: a new world order is dawning (Stallard 2025). China's military prowess was not just evident but being flaunted.¹ Xi's leadership, his commitment to guaranteeing national reunification and China's return to global pre-eminence were manifest in the display.

For many security analysts, a cross-strait crisis is not inevitable, but it is now increasingly likely (Lin, Culver and Hart 2025). In the face of ominous warnings by Xi, rhetoric that the reunification of Taiwan with China constitutes national rejuvenation, coupled with the implementation of a sophisticated grey-zone campaign,² this threat is undeniably credible. Recent testimony by Admiral Samuel J. Paparo, Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command, before the US Senate Committee on Armed Services, made this point strongly. In his words: "In 2024, the People's Liberation Army demonstrated growing capabilities through persistent pressure operations, with military pressure against Taiwan increasing by 300 percent. China's increasingly aggressive actions near Taiwan are not just exercise. They are rehearsals" (Paparo 2025, 14–15). According to recent press reports, China spent approximately US\$21 billion on military exercises around Taiwan and in the Western Pacific last year, a nearly 40 percent spike from 2023 (Lee and Blanchard 2025).

While the frequency, sophistication and anticipated military capabilities of China are often measured and analyzed, success ultimately depends on

1 This parade was the occasion at which China unveiled its land, sea- and air-based strategic forces as the nuclear triad. The parade focused on new weaponry, most notably missiles (intercontinental ballistic, hypersonic and cruise), augmented nuclear capabilities, unmanned systems, drones, lasers, artificial intelligence (AI) platforms, space defence systems, fighter jets, bombers and upgraded main battle tanks.

2 The term "grey zone" first appeared in the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review*. It refers to multi-dimensional activities aimed to alter adversary behaviour while remaining below the threshold of conventional military employment. See Hoffman (2015, 25–36).

leadership. Increasingly, as the CCP limits access, interviews and controls public statements (as well as military publications) this decision “black box” is becoming increasingly opaque (Fish 2014). Nevertheless, given President Xi’s public campaign of addressing corruption and malfeasance in the PLA, we now have a means of assessing the general health and competence of China’s senior military leadership, allowing us to draw implications from that concerning the likelihood of cross-strait military incursions by 2027. In short, prolonged infighting between the military and the CCP is negatively affecting the PLA’s priorities and foci as a fighting force, as well as capability development, overall readiness, the unity of the chain of command and the general state of civil-military relations, specifically between Xi and the PLA’s senior leadership.

Prior to narrowing in on military corruption, one must first understand Chinese politics at a broader, societal level. This paper will first contextualize Xi Jinping’s centralization of power, his increasing securitization of the state and his use of corruption charges more broadly as a means of targeting rivals, implementing his vision of effective governance informed by ideological indoctrination and supported by strict party discipline, as he incessantly tightens his personal control over intra-party power dynamics. From this starting point, the focus will be turned on Xi’s anti-corruption campaigns directed specifically at the PLA and related state organs since he assumed office in 2012.³ From there, the specifics of Xi’s concerns with the military will be analyzed and related to his overall confidence in achieving a successful military modernization program enabling action against Taiwan, according to the clearly enunciated timelines of 2027, 2035 and 2049. Finally, deductions will be drawn from the evidence available and trendlines and indicators identified to be mapped out as the anti-corruption campaign likely intensifies.

Xi Jinping’s Rise to Power

3 For a high-level analysis of Xi’s prolonged challenges in running the PLA, see Czin and Culver (2025).

Xi Jinping, born in Beijing in 1953, is the son of revolutionary veteran Xi Zhongxun, recognized as one of the founding fathers of the CCP, and subsequent vice premier and party propaganda chief. Considered a “princeling,” a child of elite senior officials who has subsequently assumed high office, Xi has lived a life of both elite privilege and equal hardship — his father, accused of leading an “anti-party clique” (during one of Mao Zedong’s periodic political purges) was imprisoned in 1962, and his family members subsequently targeted during the 1966 Cultural Revolution for prolonged and harsh persecution.⁴

Ultimately able to “rehabilitate” himself, Xi joined the CCP in 1974 and progressively rose through the ranks, early on serving as a branch secretary, and then filling a series of increasingly important municipal, party and provincial leadership positions (such as the governor of Fujian and Zhejiang provinces). Rewarded for his competence, Xi was promoted to Shanghai party secretary and then named, in 2007, one of China’s nine members of the standing committee of the CCP’s Political Bureau (Politburo), the highest ruling body in the party. Subsequently elected vice president of China in 2008, Xi also assumed the role of vice chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2010. In November 2012, during the CCP’s 18th Party Congress, Xi was again re-elected to the standing committee of the Politburo, appointed general secretary of the CCP, and elevated to chairman of the CMC. In March 2013, Xi was formally named president of China by the National People’s Congress (NPC).⁵

Upon confirmation, Xi immediately began consolidating his hold on power by implementing a nationwide anti-corruption campaign. An astute political operator, Xi targeted the military and security services, the political cadre system and the propaganda apparatus, as well as party elites (Ajrotutu et al. 2025). In a signal of how extensive this campaign would be, Xi pledged to go after both “tigers and flies,” a reference to high- and low-ranking officials (Branigan 2013). This campaign continues to this day, with estimates of around five million CCP members having been investigated

4 The family was initially stripped of all party status. Xi Jinping, branded a counter-revolutionary, was sent down to the countryside to learn from the peasants, and his half-sister (Xi Heping) is believed to have killed herself after suffering intense personal, political and physical attacks.

5 For a good overview of Xi’s rise, see Shambaugh (2021).

(and 4.7 million removed), including the purging of some 10 percent of the Central Committee of the CCP since 2022 (Wu 2025).⁶ Principally motivated to remove any possible challengers to his rule and eliminate factions (associated with the previous Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao regimes), Xi has used purges to enforce ideological campaigns, counter malfeasance, neutralize dissent, eliminate rivals, affirm the primacy of the CCP, reform institutions, alter norms and, most importantly, personalize the regime under his name.⁷ In so doing, Xi has promoted a cult of personality and is often now equated as leading a Mao-style dictatorship, aptly referred to as a “Party of One” (Wong 2023).

Xi’s comprehensive centralization of power in China is increasingly fomenting challenges to his authority. They are coming from retired Politburo Standing Committee members, other princelings, social unrest, and, most significantly, the military (Lam 2025). The latter is far more important than the others as the PLA is not a professional apolitical state army, but rather the armed wing of the CCP (Fitzgerald 2024). Thus, its most important mission is ensuring the survival of the party above all else and, if required, at the expense of all other considerations and interests. This intimate, hierarchical and existential relationship between these two organizations is based on and reflects Mao’s famous dictum that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” (Mao 1938).

6 The Central Committee of the CCP is a 205-member party organ that elects the general secretary and the memberships of the Politburo, the Politburo Standing Committee and the CMC.

7 Early in his tenure, Xi declared his commitment to “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” often referred to as “the Chinese Dream.” In October 2016, the CCP anointed Xi a “core leader,” an honorific previously only held by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. The following year, the CCP codified Xi’s name and ideology officially as “thought” (“Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era”), in the party’s constitution. In March 2018, the NPC subsequently enshrined Xi’s ideology in the country’s constitution and further passed amendments that abolished term limits for the country’s president, enabling Xi to remain in office as “president for life.” Finally, in 2021, the CCP passed a historical resolution highlighting the CCP’s “major achievements and historical experience” over the past 100 years, giving Xi’s accomplishments to a status equivalent to those of Mao or Deng.

The Never-Ending Problem

Corruption has been a long-standing issue in the PLA.⁸ The organization has gone through numerous purges over the decades at the direction of the CCP. While graft and fraud have always been issues, the scale and impact of these behaviours became vastly more entrenched in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, when the PLA was given authority to establish commercial enterprises to sustain itself, as military budget allocations stagnated with resources going elsewhere in support of transforming the economy under Deng Xiaoping (Bickford 1999). Even when the PLA was forced to relinquish its businesses and cease engaging in commercial activities in 1998, corruption continued to be endemic throughout the organization, specifically in terms of bribes for promotions, appointments and military procurement (Pant and Kumar 2024). However, rarely are purges against corruption in the PLA primarily (or solely) motivated by financial mismanagement concerns.⁹ Rather, investigations into malfeasance are usually equally driven by political factors, largely revolving around questions of loyalty concerning the degree to which senior officers, various internal factions and, indeed, the entire institution will follow, abide by and implement the direction of the CCP. This is particularly true during sensitive periods such as war, social upheavals, international flux and the ushering in of new elite leadership cadres who are highly motivated to reconfigure power arrangements, in part to remove possible challengers, especially those influential during previous regimes.

All the post-Deng leaders of the CCP have struggled to get firm control over the PLA (Li 2015). This distance, and sometimes estrangement, between the party leadership and the military has been developing since at least the Cultural Revolution when the PLA began getting accustomed to running

8 The PLA is not unique in this regard, as corruption, at varying levels, is a common feature throughout China’s polity, society and economy. As summarized by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence of the United States (2025), “Corruption is an endemic feature of and challenge for China, enabled by a political system with power highly centralized in the hands of the CCP, a CCP-centric concept of the rule of law, a lack of independent checks on public officials, and limited transparency.”

9 Given the pervasiveness of corruption due to the nature of these systems, almost everyone could be investigated for, and found guilty of, corruption. Thus, this rationale cannot on its own account for where, when, and against whom corruption purges occur.

its own affairs and involved in many aspects of Chinese society well beyond the military realm (Bullard and O'Dowd 1957). Furthermore, the fraternal bonds that originally connected political and military leaders during the revolutionary period have steadily eroded as new generations of leaders began taking over these organizations, largely in isolation from each other. None of the post-Deng political leaders have served in the military proper, although some have briefly filled military positions (Mulvenon 2013).¹⁰ As a result, there is a persistent concern that the PLA may again become too autonomous as an organization, which could undermine their complete and unwavering loyalty to the party. For Xi, the PLA is the defining enabler of his commitment to “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and the reunification of Taiwan with the mainland.

Xi's Anti-Corruption Campaign

Shortly after assuming power in 2012, President Xi embarked on an initial “cleansing” of the PLA, which was principally motivated to remove any possible challengers to his rule and eliminate factions associated with previous leaders. His goal was to bring about a far more personalist, centralized system of party control over the military than what had existed over the past number of decades. Xi's conviction that real progress toward a true joint warfighting force demanded at the outset reaffirmed party supremacy, increased political indoctrination, a return to discipline in the ranks and the clear demonstration of strongman leadership was evident early (Cercius Group Ltd. 2024a).¹¹

10 Xi Jinping, nevertheless, has more experience and credibility with parts of the military compared to Jiang and Hu, given his long-standing ties with some military officers through “princeling” networks, and was the mishu (personal secretary) of Defence Minister Geng Biao in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These advantages assisted Xi in assuming the chairmanship of the CMC immediately when he became CCP general secretary and president of China, unlike Hu, who had to wait two years after assuming these positions to become the CMC chairman.

11 Xi was initially afforded unprecedented autonomy within leadership circles as many elites were convinced that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 foreshadowed threats to the CCP (particularly under the collective leadership model implemented in the post-Deng era).

Increasingly escalatory in nature, President Xi's PLA purges can be categorized into three rounds (Cercius Group Ltd. 2024b). The first began in 2014 with Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, both former vice chairmen of the CMC¹² (the highest-ranking positions in the entire military). Each was investigated after they had retired and both were eventually found guilty of corruption, stripped of their ranks and expelled from the CCP (BBC News 2016).¹³ Their removal was part of a larger purge of several senior officials throughout the party, including Bo Xilai (former party secretary for Chongqing), Zhou Yongkang (former member of the Politburo and head of the Ministry of Public Security) and Ling Jihua (former head of the General Office of the CCP), who were all accused of subverting Xi's authority and centralization efforts (Cheng 2018). Several other senior military officers were removed as well during this period, given they were linked to entrenched patronage networks (Chan and Chi-yuk 2016).

A second round of purges occurred throughout the latter part of the same decade. Generals seen as trying to establish their own patronage networks (and with questionable loyalties to Xi) were targeted.¹⁴ It is estimated that approximately 100 senior officers were purged by 2017 (ibid.). These purges coincided with major structural reforms to the military led by Xi. Many of these initiatives specifically aimed at combatting corruption, such as the 2015 order for the PLA to divest of their involvement in any remaining “paid services” (for example, accepting civilian patients at military hospitals and renting out military warehouses to businesses). Additionally, the secretary of the Commission for Discipline Inspection, responsible for corruption investigations to the CMC, was empowered to bring about the greater subservience of the PLA to CCP leadership and

12 The CMC is the most senior executive military body in the CCP and state system, responsible for overseeing strategy, planning, the theatre commands, operational deployments and senior appointments, as well as for defence spending for the PLA, the People's Armed Police (PAP) and the militia. While the size of this body has fluctuated over the years, in general the CMC is led by the chairman, currently Xi Jinping, as commander-in-chief, and two vice chairmen who are usually the PLA's most senior officers (although sometimes a civilian who is being groomed to become leader may become a vice chair), who assist the chairman in the execution of his duties. Several “regular members” (currently numbering four positions and staffed by senior military officers) satisfy supporting roles.

13 Xu died of cancer before he was sentenced, whereas Guo was sentenced to life in prison in 2016.

14 Most notably, this purge led to the removal of both General Zhang Yang, director general of the Political Work Department, and General Fang Fenghui, chief of the Joint Staff, in 2017.

guidance through increased policing and monitoring efforts directed from the top (Mulvenon 2016).

Other reforms, such as organizational restructuring with respect to the seven military regions of the People's Republic of China (PRC), reducing the dominance and size of China's ground forces, significant investments in the rocket, navy and air forces, and replacing the PLA's anachronistic four general departments' administrative apparatus with a more tailored structure (which further centralized command and control under the CMC), appear largely motivated to ensure the PLA's ongoing modernization and transformation (Wuthnow and Saunders 2017). A revised doctrine aspired to turn the force into a modern, capable warfighting force "ready for the fight, capable of combat, and sure to win" (Xinhua 2017). At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi ordered the military to become a modern combat-capable force by 2035 and a "world class military" by 2049, attaching specific timelines, capacities and competencies to legitimize and guide the large-scale reforms already occurring (Neill 2017).¹⁵ In order to achieve these objectives, Xi emphasized the need for the PLA to become a fully integrated military whose various services and arms operate in a joint manner, requiring a reduction in size and priority of the army in favour of the naval, air and missile services. Xi's reforms also aimed to accelerate the PLA's transformation, a process began by his predecessor Hu Jintao,¹⁶ from mechanization (acquiring modern platforms) to informatization (connecting these platforms into proven communication networks, such as satellites), and eventually to intelligitization (integrating AI, quantum computing and other advanced technologies into the force) (Rira 2021). To help drive this transition, Xi has most recently introduced the "Civil-Military Fusion" strategy, another initiative began by Hu, but one that has now become a

full-fledged, society-wide campaign, to better enrol and direct private industry, state-owned industries and academic/research institutions into developing and building technologies with military applications for the PLA (Maizland 2020).

President Xi, however, has always made it clear that the political loyalty of the PLA to the CCP, which means to him personally as the general secretary of the party, and as commander-in-chief as the CMC chairman, remains their paramount duty over and above any other goal.¹⁷ Anyone who tries to impede Xi's military reforms (or who is not supportive of his vision and purpose for the PLA) is "fair game" for investigation, removal and prosecution (Cercius Group Ltd. 2024a). That said, Xi has long been careful to combine sanctions with incentives, such as continual funding increases, promotions, enforced retirement to facilitate the career advancement of younger officers, and an acceptance of the *primus inter pares* status of the ground forces, as well as an acquiescence to the PLA's autonomy by civilian leaders (Wuthnow 2025). Employing a "carrot-and-stick" approach with clear direction and respect for the military, Xi's efforts initially had a stabilizing effect on the top echelons of the PLA, signalling perhaps that the purges were coming to an end, at least in the senior ranks. Notionally, an already prolonged period of anti-corruption enforcement and reforms, had achieved the desired effect, ridding corruption and quelling questions of political loyalty. Striking evidence of military advances and increased capabilities was evident in annual US reports to Congress tracking China's military modernization.¹⁸ These developments no doubt positively impacted morale, confidence and discipline in the PLA. Indeed, at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022 (where Xi also received an unprecedented third term as CCP general secretary) he declared victory over corruption, stating "serious hidden dangers

15 The 2035 goal is usually assessed as the PLA's possessing the ability to reclaim Taiwan by force, including in a scenario where there is foreign intervention (namely, the United States) to support Taipei. The 2049 goal is generally assessed as the PLA having the same, if not greater, capability across the board as the United States.

16 There are several lines of effort and priorities regarding PLA modernization that Xi adopted from Hu and furthered in a more comprehensive way, including prioritizing the development of naval forces, the use of grey-zone operations as a privileged tool in furthering China's claims, de facto control over contested maritime spaces in East Asia, such as the South China Sea, and facilitating greater security capability development support from industry and society. Hu's concerns about the negative effects corruption were having in modernizing the military, and, in general, the party's ability to have control over and to direct the PLA, most likely also played a major role in informing Xi's centralization efforts to reassert party authority.

17 Reflective of these processes of reasserting party control over the military has been the emphasis on the "chairman responsibility system" since Xi began his reign, wherein the chairman of the CMC is not simply a political figurehead but plays the leading role in giving directions, and in demanding follow-through as well as reporting back to the PLA on virtually every line of effort in their organization.

18 These reports highlighted the growing quantity and quality of advanced naval ships, as well as the expansion of China's aircraft carrier program; fighter jets and bombers; marine corps and other amphibious capabilities; air-, land- and sea-launched cruise and ballistic missiles (both conventional and nuclear); improved command and control and intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance assets and networks; a growing emphasis on jointness between various military elements in conducting complex operations (such as fire support operations); and the increasing number and complexity of military exercises and deployments undertaken, especially by the navy, further from Chinese shores.

inside the Party, the country, and the military have been removed” (*Global Times* 2022). His optimism, however, proved short-lived. The following summer ushered in a new and unprecedented round of renewed PLA leadership removals.

The Current Round of Purges

Since 2023, at least 15 full generals and admirals¹⁹ have been removed due to charges or even suspicions of corruption, disciplinary violations, bribery, economic graft and political disloyalty (Kumar 2024).²⁰ Most of these terminations have taken place in the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), which is responsible for the vast majority of the PLA’s conventional and nuclear missile arsenals, as well as in the Equipment Development Department (EDD), which is in charge of military procurement as one of the CMC’s functional departments.²¹ The extensive nature of this prosecution calls into question (for some) Xi’s strongman persona. Despite more than a decade of effort, Xi has not been able to successfully eradicate corruption (Kou 2017; Char 2023).

In August 2023, the entire PLARF leadership was removed, including its Commander General Li Yuchao and Political Commissar General Xu Zhongbo, due to suspicions and subsequent investigations. Of note, the PLARF had been acquiring large tracts of land in Western China to build silos for their growing arsenal of fixed, nuclear and land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles. These land purchases may have produced many opportunities for fraud by senior officers, including (for example) the reselling some of these lands at far higher prices than the original purchase price, as well as other procurement irregularities

19 In the PLA, full general/admiral rank is three stars. The numbers cited of removed officers may vary given differences among researchers in their understanding of the current state of ongoing prosecutions and convictions versus also counting those officers who have disappeared from public view but have not been formally dismissed or charged.

20 Since assuming power, Xi has removed at least 78 PLA officers at the rank of two stars or above. The number of those targeted is currently changing on an almost weekly basis.

21 In 2016, Xi made the PLARF into a full service of the PLA, putting it on equal organizational footing with the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), the PLA Ground Forces (PLAGF) and the PLA Navy (PLAN).

(Palmer 2024). Furthermore, there may also have been concerns about these activities degrading the operational state of China’s quickly expanding land-based nuclear forces. Credible media reports, for example, describe missiles filled with water rather than fuel, and silos in Western China with retractable openings that did not function correctly, preventing effective launch capabilities (Martin and Jacobs 2024). Finally, there is a rumour that Li Yuchao’s son may have sold sensitive military secrets to the United States while he was studying there (Tran 2024). The appointment of officers from other services to take command of the PLARF also indicated that President Xi had lost all confidence in this service to manage its own affairs, in particular, to maintain discipline and root out corruption (U.S. Department of Defense 2024).²²

Moreover, the EDD has always been seen as a site of major graft and fraud given its mandate, particularly as of late, considering the large number of major capital projects under way. In July 2023, the PLA announced that all procurement programs dating back to 2017 would be investigated. Furthermore, then-Vice Chairman General He Weidong, a loyalist of Xi, stated that the CMC would crack down on “fake combat capabilities” at a speech in March 2024. These actions demonstrated real concerns about the impacts of corruption on military preparedness (*ibid.*). Party and military leaders alike have been forced to witness the deficiencies in capabilities and overall lack of preparedness within the Russian military due to corruption, which became readily apparent during the first year of their full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Palmer 2024). In short, the subsequent purges within the EDD and the PLARF appeared to be largely focused on financial rather than political corruption, with senior officials making profits off military procurement and land purchases (*ibid.*).

The most senior officers removed during this time — and who had connections and histories with these branches of the PLA — were the previous two defence ministers (both appointed by Xi), Wei Fenghe (2018–2023) and Li Shangfu (March–October 2023). Both men were found guilty of corruption, stripped of their rank and expelled from the party in June 2024 (Hawkins 2024). Prior to becoming defence minister, Wei

22 In October 2024, President Xi visited a PLARF base that may in part have been a visual signal that the service had regained his trust at this time. However, another round of purging of their command team in 2025 indicates corruption issues continue to plague this organization.

was the commander of the Second Artillery Corps, the precursor to the PLARF. Li was previously the deputy commander of the PLA Strategic Support Force, a new arm of the organization established by Xi, and also the commander of the EDD. Li's removal was officially attributed to issues associated with financial corruption, whereas Wei's removal was attributed more to political corruption (Cercius Group Ltd. 2024a).

In June 2024, President Xi hosted a CMC Political Work Conference in the former CCP revolutionary base in Yan'an.²³ During the conference, he emphasized the need to uphold the party's absolute leadership over the military and the responsibility of the PLA senior ranks to be focused on strengthening the armed forces. Furthermore, he stated that political work is the "lifeline" of the military, which must be led by those who are reliable and loyal to the party. For Xi, corruption within the military was intolerable (Xinhua 2024). The tone of the conference was a clarion call by Xi for the PLA leadership to seriously tackle malfeasance and, as a warning, that future rounds of purges and removals would continue, which they did. In short order, high-level leaders (previously immune) were targeted. An investigation (announced in November 2024) into, and the subsequent dismissal of, Admiral Miao Hua, the former PLAN political commissar and CMC member in charge of the Political Work Department, was shocking to many. Equally, the possible inquiry into Admiral Dong Jun (who was promoted to admiral by Miao), and the current defence minister, suggests the focus of prosecutions could be shifting (or expanding) to other services and departments in the military (Chen 2024). If Admiral Dong is ultimately removed (the details of this case remain opaque), this will be the third consecutive defence minister appointed by Xi whom he, himself, has fired. That said, Dong appears to have escaped prosecution for now, being seen in public as part of Xi's official visit to Vietnam in April 2025 (E. Wong 2025). By the summer of 2025, furthermore, Admiral Dong had fully resumed all his duties as defence minister, playing major roles in both the 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting and

23 In 2014, President Xi hosted a previous Political Work Conference in Guitan, another important site for the CCP and the PLA during the revolutionary period, where he emphasized the need for improved political conduct in the military.

the Beijing Xiangshan Forum, as well as overseeing the resumption of military-to-military channels of communication with the United States (Kine 2025).

It is worth noting that the ongoing corruption purges are against both the political and the operational elements of the officer corps. Of note, Admiral Miao, hand-picked by Xi to be the political commissar of the PLAN (coming over from the PLAGF) before being appointed to the CMC in 2017, is the second consecutive director of the Political Work Department to be removed for corruption. Miao's fate first appeared sealed when he was removed as a delegate in the NPC, which is the parliament of the PRC, and then from the CMC in late April of 2025 (Liang 2025). The 16th session of the standing committee of the 14th National People's Congress formally voted to remove him from his position as a member of the CMC in late June. Finally, before the Fourth Plenum in October, Miao, alongside several other generals and admirals, was officially expelled from the CCP and formally placed under criminal investigation (Dang, Wang and Zhen 2025).²⁴

While the exact reasons for his investigation are still unclear, Miao's removal signals that Xi struggles to control even his personal, fully endorsed military appointees. He is likely concerned that Miao's former CMC position (which wields immense power in building networks of loyalists through pay-for-promotion schemes) could have been used to seed challengers to him as well as the party's control over the military.²⁵ In short, Xi demands absolute loyalty and has "no mercy" for either military or CCP officials who put themselves before the party. Despite this clear reality, problems at the highest levels continue. For example, in late March 2025, General He Weidong, the second vice chairman of the CMC, was detained due to

24 A plenum is a meeting of the CCP's Central Committee, which occurs seven times over five years in between Party Congresses, which occur every five years. Plenums are highly secretive affairs where the Central Committee reviews progress reports on the implementation of the ongoing five-year plan, as outlined at the Party Congress, and gives further direction and guidance to ensure China achieves the objectives laid out in these plans.

25 These concerns played a role in the dismissal of General Zhang Yang, who held the directorship of the Political Work Department before Admiral Miao, and of General Xu Caihou, who had built a vast network of loyalists during his time as CMC vice chairman with one of his proteges, Lieutenant General Gu Junshan, also removed due to corruption.

corruption allegations. Xi Jinping formally removed He from the CMC in April 2025. Like Miao, He was expelled from the CCP and placed under criminal investigation in October (ibid). To date, he is the most senior officer purged in the current round, the third CMC member to be removed from the seven-person body since 2023, and yet another appointee and close Xi loyalist who has been dismissed (McCartney 2025).²⁶ Other lesser (but still noteworthy) and more recent targets include former PLARF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Sun Jinming; Chief of Staff of the PLAN Vice Admiral Li Hanjun; Political Commissar of the PLAN Admiral Yuan Huazhi; Commander of the PAP General Wang Chunming; Discipline Chief of the PLARF Lieutenant General Wang Zhibin; Director of the CMC's Logistics Support Department Lieutenant General Zhang Lin; and the Political Commissar of the CMC's Joint Logistics Support Force Lieutenant General Gao Daguang (Erickson 2025; Zheng and Chik 2025). General Wang Qiang, who was until very recently serving as Central Theatre commander, has also been mysteriously absent, making all but one of the seven theatre commanders' current whereabouts and status unknown (Hille 2025). Furthermore, Admiral Hu Zhongming, commander of the PLAN, was not present at the commissioning ceremony of China's newest aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, in November, raising speculation that he has been removed from his position, given his absences from several high-profile meetings and events over the past few months (Zheng 2025).

Some, but not all, of these officers were officially expelled from the CCP in the lead up to the Fourth Plenum in October, confirming suspicions that they had been purged (T. Wong 2025).²⁷ Others from this list who have not been officially purged were nonetheless not present at this meeting even though they are Central Committee members. Indeed, more than 60 percent of the PLA delegates (27 of 42) were absent while many military commanders listed as alternate delegates, those pre-approved

to be appointed to the Central Committee when vacancies emerge, were skipped over for civilian party members. Because of these absences and expulsions, the Fourth Plenum was the most striking visualization of the extent of the ongoing purges against the PLA leadership to date, leading China scholars Neil Thomas and Lobsang Tsering (2025) to label it the "Purge Plenum." Furthermore, Xi did not appoint new members to the CMC (keeping the three vacancies on the body), but did appoint current CMC member General Zhang Shengmin, head of anti-corruption efforts in the PLA, to second vice chairman: a signal that the CMC will not be reconstituted until the next Party Congress in 2027 (McDonnell and Guinto 2025).

Purges are occurring not just in the PLA, but also in the defence industry and research organizations. Several senior executives of large Chinese defence companies such as China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, China North Industries Group Corporation and the China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation have been investigated recently for corruption and subsequently removed from important state positions. Prominent figures in this domain have not been spared, including Hu Wenming, the chief architect of China's aircraft carrier program (Pant and Kumar 2024). Even more recently, Zhang Jianhua, head of the State Administration of Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defence, was suspected of "serious violations of discipline and law" and subsequently turned himself in to authorities. These actions seem to be driven by Xi's determination to ensure an efficient and effective military industrial complex is established to further China's civil-military fusion strategy. Furthermore, Xi may be looking to break apart patronage networks within the broader defence sector to better integrate party loyalists. His goal is to ensure a successful end-to-end military modernization and transformation. This necessitates critical, unfiltered progress assessments and the eradication of corruption from both the supply and developmental chains that could jeopardize the quality of defence systems and the successful adoption of emerging and disruptive technologies (such as hypersonics, quantum and AI) now being developed (Tang 2024).

26 General He's association with Xi originated when both men were stationed in Fujian Province between the 1980s and early 2000s. Unlike past vice chairmen, General He was appointed to this position in 2022 without first being a "regular member" of the CMC.

27 The military officials removed were He Weidong, vice-chairman of the CMC; Miao Hua, director of the CMC's political work department; He Hongjun, executive deputy director of the CMC's political work department; Wang Xiubin, executive deputy director of the CMC's joint operations command centre; Lin Xiangyang, Eastern Theatre commander; Qin Shutong, the Army's political commissar; Yuan Huazhi, the PLAN's political commissar; Wang Houbin, the PLARF commander; and Wang Chunming, the PAP commander.

What Is Xi Worried About?

It is impossible to determine the specific worries, and the priorities among them, driving Xi's continuous purges of the PLA leadership and related state organs. Nevertheless, some mixture of the following general motivations appears to be sustaining these actions (Yang 2025)²⁸:

- Xi is genuinely concerned that corruption is affecting the development of the PLA materially. It appears this concern was *a*, or perhaps *the*, motivating factor for the removal of the entire PLARF leadership, given reports about the poor quality and maintenance of missiles and their silos (Ji 2024).²⁹ Relatedly, Xi may have anxieties over whether or not he is receiving accurate reports from the PLA on the organization's trajectories for meeting readiness and capability goals. He also may be concerned that as the PLA professionalizes into a competent, modern, warfighting-capable force, the senior military leadership may increasingly adopt "praetorian propensities" in terms of expanding their roles from focusing on *how to implement* China's military and security objectives toward feeling they should have a greater say in *determining* what these objectives should be (Schmidt 2021).³⁰
- Xi is worried that rivalries between different PLA patronage networks are undermining his ability to guarantee his complete authority over the PLA. Xi appears to be struggling with controlling factional infighting, even between networks associated with him. He may, furthermore, be increasingly motivated to attenuate these factions, and take advantage of their infighting to further wear them down, in so doing creating

"coalitions of the weak" to further entrench his personalist, centralist rule (Shih 2022).³¹

- Now in his early seventies, Xi may also face increasing paranoia about whether he can trust the PLA leadership as domestic and foreign challenges become more acute — particularly with the United States. This apprehension would be heightened over the ongoing uncertainty of his assuming a fourth term (in 2027). Moreover, Xi himself is vulnerable to corruption charges (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2025³²). The secretary general is anxious to ensure that entering these difficult times he can fully rely on the PLA to secure his rule regardless of what happens (Chan 2022).³³
- Xi is also aware that corruption in the PLA is a function of the "peace disease," that is, the PLA's lack of combat experience. Specifically, corruption is seen as a signal that the institution does not take seriously the possibility of having to fight a major war in the near term and is thus willing to tolerate the material and competency degradations associated with corruption, given so many leading military leaders personally benefit from this system (Jones 2019).
- Finally, building off previous rounds of purges without significant threats to his position, Xi may simply be more comfortable in assuming the risks and challenges in continually going after senior PLA leaders as deemed necessary. While he is most likely disappointed that he has not fully consolidated his uncontested power over the armed forces, Xi remains confident in his ability to eliminate individuals and quell factions that could threaten the CCP's continued rule. He may also believe that regularizing such purges is a necessary part of reasserting party control over the PLA, manifested in

28 These factors have been augmented by additional comments by the authors.

29 The continued purging of the upper echelons of the PLARF, with essentially two entire command teams dismissed in two years, speaks to the continued inability of Xi to root out issues within this service.

30 Bernard D. Cole (2010) first highlighted the possibility of such a mindset being entrenched in a more operationally focused and confident officer corps in the concluding chapter of his book on the PLAN.

31 Such a system was constructed by Mao during the last 10 years of his reign, moving away from playing off and balancing factions against one another, toward eliminating their leaders entirely and instead surrounding himself with weak and isolated figures with no power base.

32 While no concrete examples of Xi's corruption are available in open sources, reportedly his siblings, nieces and nephews have held assets worth over US\$1 billion in business investments and real estate. The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence analysis chronicles how senior-level CCP positions are afforded access to privileged insider and economic information, which is used to the advantage of party elites to accumulate undisclosed wealth.

33 This sentiment is heavily informed by Xi's belief that the Soviet Union collapsed due to the Communist Party losing the loyalty of the military, which was unwilling to intervene to ensure party rule during a period of intense external and internal change.

his personalist form of rule, even if it causes temporary setbacks in other priorities such as readiness.

As earlier noted, the exact order of importance and intersecting nature of these worries is hard to gauge and map. A lack of transparency about the ongoing purges, including who is being targeted and why, is a recognized intelligence gap.³⁴ Nonetheless, all indicators point to an overarching theme. Xi fundamentally lacks complete confidence in the PLA and its leadership. His unease draws from evidence of capability issues, internal rivalries, graft and patronage networks that negatively impact on chain-of-command certainty, and an increasing distrust in the PLA's unwavering commitment in times of acute crisis, exacerbated by unresolved succession planning and an unwillingness of the military to fully rise above wide-ranging and seemingly institutionalized corrupt practices.

Although Xi's absolute control remains elusive, he believes himself to be a man of destiny, the only person who can lead China back to its rightful place as a respected global power, behind which the entirety of the party-state apparatus must be in complete unison. As a result, he strives to, as Mao did in his final years of his rule, to create a highly centralized, personalist leadership system within which the loyalty of the military is guaranteed and no threats to his goals and ambitions can emerge.

The differences between Mao and Xi are, however, considerable. Mao was a soldier and entrenched leader of the PLA, while Xi has only filled a rather low-level administrative military post for a fixed period of time.³⁵ Mao was the son of a wealthy farmer, ideologue and true Communist who used his charisma to incite populist revolution, whereas Xi is a princeling, a stoic technocrat who works through the bureaucracy and is process-oriented. Rational, ruthless and a resilient true believer in the party and China's natural pre-eminence, Xi manufactures consent while Mao inspired fervent followership.

34 Prosecutions illustrate an element of selectivity, as no senior official (including Xi himself) is likely above corrupt practices along their individual careers.

35 After graduation in 1979, Xi was assigned to the General Office of the State Council and General Office of the CCP's Central Military Commission, where he served as one of three secretaries to Geng Biao, the secretary general and member of the standing committee of the CCP's CMC.

Key Takeaways

Xi Is Not in Total Control

The ongoing rounds of purges against his own appointed generals and admirals send the signal that Xi has not consolidated control over the PLA since 2012. Despite his portrayal as a paramount leader and the sizable military reforms he has introduced, Xi is facing similar issues in civil-military relations to those his predecessors confronted (Wedeman 2024). In particular, it appears Xi struggles with exercising influence throughout the military, which is largely defined by factional relations and rivalries. Indeed, the ongoing purge has shifted from first affecting members largely associated with the Shaanxi Gang (whose ties to Xi stem from bonds to his family's ancestral homeland in Shaanxi Province) — such as Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu — to now toward the Fujian Clique (whose ties to Xi are based on the development of personal relationships when Xi occupied various party positions in that province from the 1980s to early 2000s) — such as Admirals Miao and Dong and General He. This dynamic may be indicative of elements of these factions using the anti-corruption purge to undermine one another (Wilder 2025), as well as limiting Xi's ability to control these dynamics by forcing him to fire his own appointees at an increasingly fast rate (Tran and Zhang 2025). It appears his vetting process for appointing loyalists throughout the PLA has been compromised, with Xi now doubting, even with loyalists occupying all senior posts, that the PLA is giving him accurate information on the military's state of readiness, internal deficiencies, corruption efforts and other sensitive matters.

Despite the risks associated with such a high turnover of senior officers and factional infighting at a level high enough to possibly cause large-scale tensions with the PLA itself, Xi appears determined to continue with his concurrent military reforms and anti-corruption purges. These efforts are seen as two sides of the same coin, necessary to produce a military that is both loyal and subordinate, as well as modern and capable. Given his personality disposition and concerns that the external and internal environments could both worsen moving forward, Xi has most likely assessed that the time to act and incur risks is now (Yang 2025). For him, the time to act and incur risks is now. Whether or not Xi can overcome the factionalist model of elite

politics defining the current PLA remains highly uncertain. The removal of so many of his loyalists from the CMC may be indicative of mounting internal opposition emerging against Xi's corruption purges and institutional military reforms, which include a renewed focus on ideological training; promoting a more revolutionary spirit; celebrating "struggle"; championing the party's ever increasing centralization of power; and implementing new rules and codes of conduct for senior military officers (even those retired), going so far as to regulate their personal social lives (Chang 2025).

A Weakened Military Leadership Has Readiness Implications

As detailed, Xi's relentless prosecution of even his hand-picked senior military leadership has important consequences for PLA readiness. Even some who have survived face demotions in status and standing.³⁶ The CMC — responsible for all major military decisions, ranging from war plans development to modernization priorities, to leadership promotions, military diplomacy, S&T innovations, procurement and equipment — has shrunk from seven to four members. Chaired by Xi (who has no operational military experience) it further only includes two army generals, who have not seen combat since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War (and another of equivalent rank from the rocket force, who is a political commissar). In short, the leadership is anything but a joint force in nature and orientation. Besides facing simply the volume of decisions and planning required of an armed force numbering more than two million members, the existent structure will suffer from subordinate senior officers not prone to taking risks in the current politicized environment, a climate of distrust both up and down the hierarchy, military members diverted by study sessions and ideological training, growing fears of speaking "truth to power" and inherent schisms existing between factional interests (Fravel 2025).

Xi's Doubts About the PLA as a Fighting Force

Until Xi has a military leadership that is seen as completely loyal, coherent and competent, he

36 Unlike his predecessors, Admiral Dong Jun, for example, as minister of defence has never been added to the CMC nor been appointed a state councillor, denying him access to Xi, the equal rank of other national-level ministers and preventing his direct access to the Chinese premier, the second-ranking party leader and the PRC's head of government.

will most likely not want to risk getting involved in a scenario that could rapidly turn into a major war, specifically over Taiwan (Matthews 2024; Czin 2025). Furthermore, Xi may have real doubts about the combat capability of the PLA, with the growing arsenal of advanced technological systems, perhaps hiding real deficiencies in leadership, command and control, and the overall resiliency of the organization to withstand and adapt to the uncertainties and setbacks associated with armed conflict (U.S. Department of Defense 2024).³⁷ This does not mean that the PLA will not be a valued tool of national power to be used in a variety of ways that could further CCP goals — including furthering a sense of Chinese nationalism in the advancement of its military, maritime commerce security (including via working with other states), pushing Chinese de facto control over adjacent waters in the East and South China Seas, and natural disaster and humanitarian assistance at home and abroad — but Xi's willingness to use them in any way that could lead to actual war, deliberate or accidental, may be low and diminishing further in the current context (Heath 2025).

Xi's Concerns About the PLA as the Party's Last Line of Defence

Even though the army would not be the first line of defence in the suppression of domestic unrest scenarios, Xi may now have real doubts as to whether he could rely on the PLA if it were needed to conduct operations putting down large-scale civil unrest.³⁸ While political instability in China seems remote at present (although backlash against China's "zero-COVID" policy did ignite the White Paper Protests, which forced tense government policy reversals), the current economic challenges and China's history of internal collapse may yet turn this issue into an increasingly dominant and all-consuming fixation for China's senior leadership if trade and

37 These concerns are represented in the "five incapables," which speak to doubts that PLA commanders possess the following abilities: judging situations, understanding higher authorities' intentions, making operational decisions, deploying forces or managing unexpected situations.

38 The PAP would be the front-line service in this respect. The PAP, which has expanded considerably since the 1990s, ultimately is under the authority of the CMC. It largely operates as an independent force from the PLA, being focused primarily on internal security matters. During times of war, however, the PAP is charged with providing support to the PLA. The recent removal of its Commander, General Wang Chunling (who transferred to the PAP from the PLAGR in 2020), however, may signal growing concerns about corruption within this organization as well.

tariff wars become entrenched and negatively impact the living standards of everyday Chinese.³⁹ Under crisis scenarios, the PLA may increasingly be focused on and further directed by Xi and the CCP toward efforts aimed at ensuring regime survival over combat preparations (ibid.). Such scenarios will almost assuredly exaggerate existing internal divisions and fault lines within the PLA.

Xi and Succession: A Crisis in Waiting

At 72 years of age, and less prone to be in attendance at key meetings that he previously never missed (such as the 2025 G20 Summit in South Africa that he opted not to attend), with unexplained absences from public view for prolonged periods and facing speculated health issues,⁴⁰ Xi is increasingly vulnerable for not already having put in place leadership succession plans (Czin 2025). This reality spurs rumours and positional jockeying among rivals, factions and members of the CCP's "old guard" (such as Hu Jintao) who remain on the sidelines, but with vested interests. Moreover, it complicates the mechanics of power transition as possible contenders remain weak, with stunted power bases and limited influence. Ongoing indecision (particularly if an unanticipated leadership crisis arises) opens the door to military involvement as the PLA remains the party's de facto "kingmaker" and behind-the-scenes influencer shaping interactions between pivotal leaders (Jost and Mattingly 2025).⁴¹

Managing a Perpetual Cycle of Prosecutions Without Resolution

Xi faces a difficult task in calibrating the anti-corruption purge in such a way as to avoid an accelerating dynamic leading to perpetual rounds of prosecutions, low morale and paranoia among

the PLA senior cadre, which seriously impacts upon party-military relations, thus undermining the perceived usefulness of the PLA as an instrument of state and party power, and possibly feeding into a larger campaign against perceived rivals and enemies in other parts of the polity (Wuthnow 2025). While PLA elites have repeatedly made a series of public statements highlighting their commitment to stamping out corruption and implementing President Xi's military reforms, depending on how deep and for how long these purges continue, they may begin to generate a more overt backlash given their intrusiveness into the functioning of the institution and control over its affairs. Indeed, President Xi is learning that going after patronage networks and factions in the PLA is akin to a game of "whack-a-mole," where as soon as one eradicates one node, another appears to immediately replace it in a different part of the military's network. As a result, this approach — which has already been ongoing for well over a decade — could continue for the indefinite future, given that the real, structural reasons for PLA corruption are not really being addressed.

The likelihood of continued churn and turnover at the senior levels of the PLA could begin to erode the PLA's relationship with Xi, further undermining his anti-corruption and reform agendas, without a clear, definable end state being realized. Furthermore, there will be huge risks and uncertainties if Xi attempts to repurpose the corruption purge into a full-scale reorganization of the PLA in a way aimed at eliminating, or at least seriously reducing the power of, China's factionist model of politics. While these purges could be part of such a strategy by Xi, given how many of his own appointees and loyalists he has had to remove and replace with others deemed even more loyal, it appears factionalist politics and infighting are operating not only beyond his control but also at the expense of it (Wilder 2025). Also, there are many risks if these purges become a force of their own beyond Xi's ability to control and shape that could possibly spread throughout the entire PLA in an uncontrolled way. Any such development could seriously erode competencies, readiness, unity and trust throughout the organization, making it more susceptible to foreign interference, especially from the United States, in terms of blackmailing senior officers and opening a route for any disgruntled or targeted members to share sensitive information with foreign powers to undermine Xi's plans.

39 This also includes in situations where there may be real differences between the senior CCP leadership about how to respond in a crisis. The most notable case in point was Deng Xiaoping, as chairman of the CMC, marshalling the loyalty of the PLA to violently put down the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest movement, effectively sidelining the CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, who opposed such a heavy-handed response. See Wu (2019).

40 Numerous unconfirmed press reports indicate Xi is suffering from health issues ranging from a cerebral aneurysm to the side effects of a possible stroke.

41 In light of these concerns, Xi's unwillingness to appoint new PLA officers to occupy positions on the CCP Central Committee at the Fourth Plenum may be not just based on his disappointment with the organization's efforts to tackle corruption but also a deliberate strategy to further reduce the role and power that the PLA has in the party itself.

The underlying motivations and effects of the ongoing anti-corruption purges reveal a fundamental tension in moulding a military that is not only both ideologically aligned and loyal to Xi but also a more professional, apolitical and modern defence force. The current culture and incentive structures, as well as the norms and practices of these two end states appear, at best, frequently at cross-purposes and, at worst, mutually incompatible. As Xi moves to try to instill perceived loyalists throughout the PLA, this will continue to politicize the organization and perhaps bring about inescapable and stark trade-offs for him to manage in trying to achieve two things at once: a personal military loyal to him, and a professional military increasingly competent in modern-day defence capabilities and competencies (Yang 2025). While it is likely that Xi's anti-corruption campaign within the PLA will continue for the foreseeable future, many questions remain about it. First and foremost, what is the likely trajectory of this endless purge?

What Are the Questions and Trendlines to Watch For?

There are a series of questions pertaining to how intensive and extensive the ongoing purge campaign will be moving forward. Top of mind is whether it moves in a sizable way into other areas of the PLA. In particular, if anti-corruption efforts became more fixated on the PLAN, it will be important to assess whether charges are largely about dismantling Admiral Miao's patronage networks, or more so due to actual concerns about corruption eroding the capabilities and overall readiness of this service, given its growing importance to China's foreign and defence ambitions. A key indicator to observe in this respect is whether any sizable PLAN purges coincide with personal attacks in the warship-building industry (paralleling what happened with the PLARF and aerospace industry), which would signal unease about graft and fraud networks coming at the expense of capability developments.⁴² Watching

42 In this respect, however, the PLARF may have been an easier site to conduct graft and fraud, given the novelty of the weapons systems being developed (and thus their true costs were not known, enabling inflated prices to enrich personnel involved in these processes) and the opaque nature of their training. The PLAN, however, is a very visible service, indeed perhaps the flagship of Chinese military power, regularly conducting exercises, training and patrols. Thus, any systemic issues with naval ships and capabilities would be easier to identify. As well, warship building is a relatively well-known cost in industry and, thus, there may be less room for inflated prices due to corruption. If, though, the PLAN begins to acquire brand-new types of platforms (such as drone motherships) that do not have a precedent, this may create an opening for increased corruption in industry.

for signals of corruption prosecutions migrating further into the PLAGF and the PLAAF, as well as in the military's four support arms (aerospace, cyberspace, information and joint logistics), should also be a priority. One underexplored area is the specific impact of corruption purges on the leadership of theatre commands.

Another area of focus is to monitor whether there will be additional purges and organizational changes to the CMC, including shrinking its membership further and potentially bringing in more departments under its direct control.⁴³ In this respect, it appears Xi will not be making new appointments to the CMC to fill vacancies, including for Admiral Dong as defence minister, any time soon, and may wait until the Party Congress in 2027 to do so. Given the continued pervasiveness of the anti-corruption campaign, Xi may feel he does not need to rush in reconstituting the CMC fully until he finds more trusted subordinates and/or allows sufficient time to further rethink the membership structure and function of the entire body. The delay may also be due to differences among Xi and senior military leaders about who and how to undertake identified replacements. Xi may also try to use corruption purges to undermine and eliminate the factions altogether as part of a larger centralization effort to bring the PLA under his direct and unquestioned control. To date, however, Xi appears to have been playing, rather than eliminating, factional politics, becoming deeply involved in promotions and appointments at various levels in the PLA with an obvious intent to insert loyalists from key groups into senior positions. Any effort to truly eradicate the existing factional system carries great risks, however, including an even larger and more extensive purge than currently under way.

While the focus has largely been on those that have been purged, it is also of interest to study those that have survived in terms of the power they possess and relationships they have with each other, the CCP and Xi. Of particular interest is First Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia, who Xi made an exception for regarding the mandatory retirement age in keeping him on during the 20th Party Congress. General Zhang has deep personal ties to Xi, including the fact that their fathers both

43 As with other top bodies throughout the Chinese polity, Xi has noticeably shrunk the size of the CMC over his tenure, moving from 11 members when he assumed power toward having six to seven members. Xi, furthermore, has already removed at least seven retired or current members from the CMC during his reign, an exceptionally high number given this is the most senior decision-making body in the entire PLA.

worked with each other during the revolutionary war under Mao. It is, however, unclear if he is truly in lockstep with Xi regarding the corruption purges, or if he is using them to undermine others. If Xi knows about this but still is retaining him, it will illustrate the power that General Zhang possesses. Another key figure to watch is General Zhang Shengmin, the newly appointed second vice chairman of the CMC and secretary of the Commission for Discipline Inspection (which is responsible for corruption investigations), who is suspected of having some links to Xi as he comes from Shaanxi Province, Xi's familial homeland, but it remains unclear how close the two are.

Finally, it is important to monitor whether more obvious signs of institutional resistance to Xi's corruption purges emerge. While a complete break from Xi's messaging is not likely, speeches or comments by senior PLA leadership about corruption issues are telling. For example, prior to his very recent removal from the CMC in early April, there had been a slight but obvious difference in recent speeches by General He, which emphasized the loyalty of the military personally to Xi, versus a recent speech by General Zhang about the importance of collective leadership in the PLA and its loyalty to the CCP (Tran and Zhang 2025). Furthermore, since July 2023, several articles appearing in the *PLA Daily*, the Chinese military's main journal, have emphasized the benefits of "collective leadership" in the organization. Many of these authors were senior officers associated with First Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia. The fact that these opinions are still being expressed, which are in effect a rebuke of Xi's centralization efforts, further reinforces that Xi does not have complete control or loyalty throughout the organization for his plans (Chang 2025). Such incidents also speak to the possible challenge the PLA faces in being loyal personally to Xi, versus being loyal to the CCP. At present, this tension is largely buried given Xi occupies the top positions of the party, state and military. If, however, concerns become more evident in the party regarding Xi's interest in securing a fourth term in power (versus laying out a clear process of succession), the PLA leadership may find itself in a difficult situation, with the need to manoeuvre between abiding by Xi's attempts to create a military of loyalists, versus being subordinate to a party that may be not united in terms of its leadership, especially in a crisis scenario.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping's assumption of power in 2012 marked a new, distinct era in civil-military relations in China. He has embarked on a large, ambitious and multi-faceted military reform campaign to transform the PLA into a well-equipped and highly capable military force prepared to engage in war if necessary. While many of these efforts began under previous leaders, especially Hu Jintao, their acceleration, comprehensiveness and integration into a coherent strategy make them unique to Xi's tenure. More fundamentally distinctive to Xi are his efforts to create and cement a centralized, personalist system of rule over the PLA, being part of a larger process to eliminate collective leadership and factionalism, which defines much of Chinese politics in the post-Tiananmen Square era. Xi does not simply want to bring about a more modern, capable PLA but one that is completely politically loyal and obedient to him, closely following his guidance and directives. Xi fervently believes that China can only achieve its goals of national rejuvenation and global leadership under his rule. Purges — another distinctive feature of Xi's handling of CCP-PLA relations — have been instrumental in achieving both of these aims: first, eliminating corruption, which is seen as corrosive to the material and psychological development of the PLA into a world-class fighting force; and second, removing anyone who appears to be, directly or indirectly, inhibiting his consolidation of power over (and within) the military.

Xi has spent significant time, energy and political capital removing senior officers from power; inserting loyalists into key positions; being directly involved in the promotion and career development of proteges; and broadening the role of the chairman of the CMC from an administrative function into more of a commander-in-chief playing an active role in the strategy, structure and operations of the PLA. After 12 years in power, however, purges continue and now are increasingly affecting Xi's own loyalists occupying key posts at the very top of the military apparatus. Such a reality is highly suggestive of the fact that Xi does not have firm and complete control over the PLA, a reality many of his predecessors also encountered and were never able to overcome. Indeed, these purges may be indicative of some level of pushback from elements of the military leadership against Xi's anti-corruption pursuits

and reforms by forcing him to remove even his own loyalists. If true, this would be reflective of the enduring role of factionalism and autonomy that defines the PLA. As a result, it is expected that Xi's anti-corruption campaign will continue, especially against the senior leadership, but with Xi trying to calibrate these efforts in surgical, limited ways to ensure they are not disrupting the overall stability and readiness trajectories desired by him. This is especially the case as China enters more difficult and delicate external and internal environments defined by domestic economic unease over the implications of growing trade and tariff rivalries with the United States, and increasing regional tensions in the South and East China Seas, as well as Xi's likely attempt to secure a fourth term as leader at the 21st Party Congress in 2027. PLA support will be vital for Xi in successfully managing each of these challenges.

Finally, given the incredible risks involved and the negative consequences for his own legacy if reunification fails to occur, it is more probable than not that unless compelled to do so by external events (such as a symbolic or actual declaration of independence by the Republic of China, overt foreign interference deemed to cross "red lines," or an unintended cross-strait military incident that violates currently accepted thresholds) Xi will not use force to reclaim Taiwan in the immediate future. While preliminary analyses (which are limited in scope given their focus on specific elements of the PLA)⁴⁴ do not show a structural impact on capability development, operations and training tempo caused by the purges, until Xi has a military leadership that he views as completely loyal, coherent and competent, he will most likely not accept the inherent risks of undertaking a kinetic scenario over the island, which could rapidly escalate into a major global conflict, putting the very existence of China in peril. The purges and reimposition of political indoctrination as a main line of effort impact intangible elements of PLA readiness that are hard to measure, such as the ability of its leaders at all levels to overcome the five incapacities, trust in the chain of command, the degree of jointness among the services and arms, and Xi's relationship with the senior leadership, especially over preparation for a Taiwan contingency. It is unclear if internal differences over Taiwan (whether regarding the soundness of risking war to reclaim the island, the prioritization of military

options to achieve this mission and/or the pace of developing the required capabilities) have played a factor in the ongoing purges, particularly among CMC members, several of whom intentionally possessed operational and warfighting experience.⁴⁵ Whether pertaining to Taiwan or other issues, the purges reflect and generate suspicion and distrust between Xi and the senior PLA leadership, which contribute, however incrementally, to further doubt in any calculation to risk war over the island, most likely pushing to the right window for Xi being comfortable in using force.⁴⁶ As a result, continual monitoring of the focus and scale of current and future purges in the PLA will serve as a critical indicator in assessing Xi's comfort and confidence level in employing the PLA in aggressive and provocative ways to challenge the United States and its allies at a level sufficient to alter the territorial realities and geopolitical alignments currently defining the Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁷

44 For example, see Martinson (2025).

45 It should be kept in mind that some of the most competent joint commanders who are outspoken about preparing for a Taiwan contingency, such as General He Weidong, have been purged. Others (with relevant operational experience regarding Taiwan) such as Admiral Dong Jun have not been appointed to the CMC.

46 M. Taylor Fravel (2025) has cited instances where China has gone to war even when the conditions have not been favourable.

47 Such analyses are beyond the scope of this paper. However, forthcoming research will address how to measure corruption's effect on PLA readiness and operational capabilities, and further identify issues still to consider, such as challenges in making assessments about China's military potential, perceptual biases and the requirement to discern the PRC's strategic vulnerabilities and Canada's desired operational effects in planning, strategy and analytic approaches.

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