

## What's Behind Xi Jinping's Purges?

Ramin Mansoori

*Ramin Mansoori is research analyst and Sinologist. He has 11 years of academic and professional experience in China, including earning his PhD from the School of International Studies at Peking University in 2022.*

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### Overview of the Incident

At 1500 Beijing time on 24 January 2026, the spokesperson of China's Ministry of National Defense, Senior Colonel Jiang Bin, announced that Zhang Youxia, a member of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and Liu Zhenli, a member of the CMC and chief of the Joint Staff Department, were suspected of serious violations of discipline and law. After deliberation by the CCP Central Committee, a decision was made to place both individuals under formal investigation.<sup>1</sup> Within the political culture of the CCP, the initiation of a formal investigation (被调查) generally signifies the end of an official's political career, particularly when the individual involved holds a high rank such as vice chairman of the CMC.

Consequently, the political shock generated by this case is exceptionally significant. Subsequently, Xinhua News Agency and other Chinese state media reproduced the brief announcement using identical wording, without any elaboration or additional explanation. Such a highly unified media narrative typically indicates the extreme sensitivity of the issue and the strict control of information dissemination.<sup>2</sup> As the most powerful and influential military figures in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) after President Xi Jinping, the investigation of Zhang Youxia, and Liu Zhenli constitutes a political signal warranting in-depth analysis. In this piece, the author's primary focus is on Zhang Youxia's purge and the reasons behind it.

### Zhang Youxia as an "Exceptionally Powerful" Figure

Zhang Youxia's extraordinarily high status within the PLA can be attributed primarily to three factors. First is political lineage and credentials. Zhang Youxia is a Red Prince (红二代), whose father was an early senior commander of the PLA and closely associated with the revolutionary history of the CCP. Within the CCP's political culture—particularly within the military system—such a background carries special symbolic significance.<sup>3</sup> Second is combat experience. Zhang Youxia is among the very few senior PLA officers who have participated in large-scale real combat operations. He took part in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and is generally regarded as having performed prominently. In today's PLA, where most senior officers' experience is limited to exercises and simulations, actual combat experience is considered a highly valuable form of political and military capital.<sup>4</sup> Third is his alliance with Xi and his role in anticorruption inside PLA. Zhang Youxia, who comes from Shaanxi (陕西) province, shares longstanding ties with Xi's family. Although Zhang is 75 years old and would normally be expected to retire, he remained

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR  
Dr. Amin Tarzi,  
Marine Corps War College

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Marine Corps University  
2076 South Street  
Quantico, VA 22134  
[www.usmcu.edu/mcupress](http://www.usmcu.edu/mcupress)

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in power due to Xi's trust. Additionally, he has long been responsible for, or deeply involved in, anticorruption investigations targeting senior PLA officers, directly or indirectly contributing to the downfall of multiple "tigers" within the military (军老虎).<sup>5</sup> This responsibility granted him not only institutional authority but also access to extensive information concerning elite personnel networks and political conduct, thereby generating considerable deterrent power. For these reasons, Zhang Youxia has been widely regarded as Xi Jinping's most important—and least replaceable—supporter within the military establishment.

### The "Official Reasons" for Zhang's Purge

At 2300 on 24 January, Xinhua News Agency employed highly politicized language to enumerate five "serious issues" attributed to Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli, including:

- Gravely betraying the trust and expectations of the Central Committee and the CMC.
- Gravely trampling on and undermining the responsibility system of the chairman of the Central Military Commission.
- Gravely exacerbating political and corruption problems that weaken the CCP's absolute leadership over the armed forces and threaten the CCP's ruling foundation.
- Gravely damaging the authority and image of the CMC collective leadership.
- Gravely damaging the political and ideological foundation of unity and progress across the armed forces, gravely undermining the military's political development, the political environment, and combat capability building.<sup>6</sup>

Within CCP political discourse, such formulations typically do not point to specific legal violations but rather constitute a definitive political judgment regarding loyalty and obedience to authority. Among them, the charge of undermining the responsibility system designed by the chairman is particularly significant. This is nearly equivalent to accusing the individuals of failing to submit to Xi Jinping's supreme military authority in practice.

On 1 February 2026, the *PLA Daily* published an important article that further explains the background and logic behind the investigations into Zhang Youxia and Liu

Zhenli. Using the metaphor of "rowing against the current" (逆水行舟不进则退), the article likens Xi Jinping Thought to the tide of the times and characterizes actions that violate Xi Jinping Thought and weaken Xi Jinping's absolute leadership over the military as moving against that current.<sup>7</sup> The report repeatedly emphasizes that the PLA must be placed under the CCP's absolute political leadership and command, which in practice means resolutely upholding Xi Jinping's authority and centralized, unified leadership. The article urges the entire military to adhere to Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, especially its military doctrine, Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military (习近平强军思想), as the guiding framework for achieving the PLA's centenary objectives.<sup>8</sup> Within this narrative framework, Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli are implicitly portrayed as "stumbling blocks" that are hindering the process of political rectification and development of the military under Xi Jinping's leadership.

### Perspectives from Western Media

Western mainstream media outlets have generally interpreted the case from the perspectives of power structure and political security. *The Economist* proposed three possible explanations:

- The outcomes of military reform and anticorruption efforts failed to meet Xi Jinping's expectations.
- Past or newly resurfaced corruption allegations involving Zhang Youxia or his family.
- Xi Jinping's growing unease over Zhang Youxia's expanding influence.<sup>9</sup>

*The Wall Street Journal* reported that Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli were suspected of leaking information regarding China's nuclear capabilities to the United States.<sup>10</sup> This claim is highly controversial. On the one hand, it significantly elevates the perceived national security severity of the case; on the other hand, it may serve to divert attention from the underlying power struggle and obscure its true causes.

### Core Analysis: Where Does the Real Issue Lie?

This is ultimately a structural conflict over power. One defining feature of Xi Jinping's governing logic is the pursuit

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of absolute and exclusive control over the military. As the Hu Jintao–Li Keqiang political factions have gradually exited the stage, Zhang Youxia emerged as one of the few remaining figures within the CCP who possessed independent political capital while exercising influence over key armed forces. In CCP political practice, the most dangerous figures are not open opponents but allies whose loyalty is incomplete.<sup>11</sup> Zhang Youxia’s support for Xi Jinping derived more from family background and established political alliances than full ideological alignment.

There is also the subject of potential divergence over the Taiwan Issue. Xi Jinping has explicitly demanded that the PLA be capable of “fighting war and winning war” (能打仗,打胜仗).<sup>12</sup> He has also prepared the military for high-intensity conflicts, including the possibility of using force to unify Taiwan.<sup>13</sup>

Zhang Youxia may have held reservations for several reasons: First, his real combat experience made him acutely aware of the devastating consequences of large-scale war. Second, military operations against Taiwan would primarily rely on naval, air, and rocket forces rather than the army. Third, his strategic outlook was shaped by traditional Cold War-era warfare, potentially limiting his ability to fully grasp and evaluate the strategic implications of modern high-technology warfare. These factors may have resulted in insufficient implementation or passive resistance with respect to key strategic directives.

### **Xi Aims to Surpass Mao**

Mao Zedong is widely regarded as the most powerful leader in the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Xi Jinping openly admires Mao and has consciously drawn from Mao’s governing style. Yet Xi’s ambition goes further: he seeks to match—or even surpass—Mao by becoming the most powerful figure in the PRC’s history.

Several steps illustrate how Xi has consolidated power in ways that are unprecedented in contemporary China. First, he assumed the three most important positions—the general secretary of the CCP, president of the PRC, and chairman of the Central Military Commission—within a short period of time, centralizing authority rapidly. Second, he altered the PRC constitution by enshrining his name and ideology within it and abolishing the two-term limit on the presidency, effectively removing institutional constraints on his rule. Third, he used the anticorruption campaign (反腐) as a political tool

to penetrate and reshape the CCP’s internal power structure. Finally, by purging high-ranking military officials, Xi secured absolute control over the PLA, something essential for maintaining unchallenged authority.

Despite Mao’s immense power, there is one objective he never achieved: the reunification of Taiwan. This remains a central historical task that Xi appears determined to accomplish. From this perspective, the recent purge involving Zhang Youxia carries a clear Taiwan dimension. Zhang is seen as insufficiently committed to the Taiwan reunification agenda, or at least not aligned with Xi’s preferred approach. To move decisively on Taiwan, Xi must ensure unquestioned loyalty within the military, especially at the highest levels. By consolidating absolute control over the Central Military Commission while simultaneously holding the top party and state positions, Xi has amassed an extraordinary concentration of power—arguably unmatched in China’s contemporary political history. Whether this power will be used to accomplish what Mao could not remain the defining question of Xi’s rule.

### **The U.S.–China Competition Factor**

With Xi Jinping’s rise to power, a new era in U.S.–China relations began. As Xi promoted a more assertive Chinese nationalism and downplayed the role the United States had played in China’s development, the relationship between the two countries gradually shifted toward strategic decoupling. The shockwaves from this decoupling reverberated within the CCP, reinforcing Xi’s agenda of internal “rectification.”

This process unfolded in stages. First came the downfall of Bo Xilai, followed later by the sidelining of Hu Jintao and Li Keqiang, and most recently the purge of Zhang Youxia. Each of these figures possessed extensive political networks and considerable influence within the CCP. When examined through the lens of their differences with Xi, a common thread emerges all were, to varying degrees, associated with support for a more cooperative or pragmatic relationship with the United States.

As U.S.–China strategic competition has intensified, the Chinese political system’s tolerance for perceived “political unreliability” has steadily declined. Alignment with Xi’s ideological and strategic vision—particularly on nationalism, security, and relations with the United States—has become a decisive criterion for political survival. In

this context, internal purges are not merely about personal power consolidation, but also about enforcing ideological conformity in an era of heightened external pressure.

## Conclusion

On the surface, the investigation into Zhang Youxia appears to concern issues of discipline and legality. In substance, however, it is more likely driven by three interrelated factors: Zhang's excessively strong and independent influence within the PLA; potential divergence on key strategic issues, particularly the Taiwan question; and structural conflict with Xi Jinping's objective of achieving absolute control over the military and implementing PLA modernization plans. As U.S.–China competition intensifies, Xi Jinping has become increasingly conservative, refusing to tolerate individuals who challenge, oppose, or threaten his leadership position.

## ENDNOTES

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