

Xi purges China's top general Zhang Youxia

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27 January 2026

An investigation announced on Saturday into China's top general Zhang Youxia, the senior vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), second in rank only to its chairman President Xi Jinping, again highlights sharp tensions within China's military—the People's Liberation Army (PLA)—and the top echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime.

Also under investigation is another CMC member, General Liu Zhenli, the PLA's chief of staff. While the two generals remain on the commission, their purge from military and party posts is all but a foregone conclusion. The latest disciplinary actions follow the expulsion of nine generals from the party last October including another trusted Xi ally, junior CMC vice chairman He Weidong, and the removal of another CMC member Admiral Miao Hua last June.

The CMC, which has overall command of the entire PLA, now consists of only two active members—President Xi himself and General Zhang Shengmin, who has overseen Mr. Xi's military purges as secretary of the CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection. His career has been as a political commissar rather than a military commander. He was appointed as CMC vice chairman last October.

The purging of General Zhang Youxia will send shockwaves through the PLA and Communist Party itself. He has been widely regarded as a staunch Xi loyalist, with family connections to the president, who like Xi is one of the “princelings”—the sons of veteran CCP members. His father was a founding member of the Red Army, who like Xi's father was purged during Mao's so-called Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, and, on his rehabilitation, became a prominent PLA general.

In announcing the investigation, the Ministry of National Defense stated that Zhang Youxia was accused of “grave violations of discipline and the law,” but provided no details. Liu Pengyu, a Chinese

Embassy spokesman in Washington, blandly told the *Wall Street Journal* that the investigation into Zhang underscored party leadership's “full-coverage, zero-tolerance approach to combating corruption.”

A *Wall Street Journal* article last weekend reported that among the accusations against Zhang was the astonishing claim that he had leaked core technical data on China's nuclear weapons to the United States—an offense tantamount to treason and subject to execution. The article was based on details of a briefing given to top Chinese military figures just prior to the announcement of Zhang's investigation provided by unnamed sources.

“Some evidence against Zhang came from Gu Jun, the former general manager of the China National Nuclear Corp., a state-owned company that oversees all aspects of China's civilian and military nuclear programs,” the article stated. No details of the alleged leak were provided. An investigation into Gu himself for suspected violations of party discipline and state laws was announced on January 19.

If it is the case that China's top general and close presidential confidante passed vital military secrets to the US, it could not simply be a matter of one corrupt individual. It would indicate fundamental disagreements within the CCP and the PLA over China's military and foreign policy under President Xi.

While not ruling out that possibility, the more likely explanation is that Xi had come to regard Zhang as a political threat that had to be removed. Zhang, along with Liu Zhenli, was one of the few PLA generals with actual combat experience. As a young officer, he had fought in China's only relatively recent military conflict against Vietnam in 1979, and again in a border clash with Vietnam that erupted in 1984.

As a result, Zhang had considerable standing within the PLA that was only enhanced by his rapid promotion up the ranks of the military and the party under Xi. In

2017, Xi elevated Zhang to the Politburo—the second highest decision-making party body and installed him as CMC junior vice chairman. At the 20th Party Congress in 2022, Zhang was promoted to CMC senior vice chairman despite being 72—well past the normal retirement age.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Saturday's briefing was told that the accusations against Zhang included taking huge bribes in exchange for facilitating promotions within the military. Such allegations have commonly been used in Xi's anti-corruption drive. But to blacken the name of Zhang within the military, Xi needed the far more serious accusation of treason to move against a potential rival.

Xi is presented in the Chinese and international press as a leader wielding absolute power. He is routinely referred to in CCP meetings and events as the “core” of the party, the font of all wisdom. He pushed through changes to the constitution removing a two-term limit on the presidency and in 2023 was re-elected unopposed for a third term.

In reality, Xi is a Bonapartist figure precariously balancing between competing factions within the party, government and the military, between social classes amid acute social tensions, and on the international stage as the lawless aggression of the Trump administration has generated huge geopolitical uncertainty in every country. Xi cannot tolerate any potential threat or challenge to his position.

The most revealing accusation against Zhang was made in the military's official newspaper, the *PLA Daily*, in an editorial published on Sunday. It declared both Zhang and Liu Pengyu had “seriously abetted political and corruption problems that affect the party's absolute leadership over the military and endanger the foundation of the party's rule.”

The reference to the party's “absolute leadership over the military” has only one meaning—President Xi and his chairmanship of the CMC. The Communist Party does indeed rest on the military—which was its means for seizing power in the 1949 Chinese Revolution and suppressing domestic opposition, as it did during the Cultural Revolution and again to put down country-wide protests in mid-1989.

Given the opaque character of the Chinese regime, there are only hints of disagreements between Zhang and Xi. An article in March last year in the US-based

think tank, the Jamestown Foundation, noted that articles in the *PLA Daily* in late 2024 written by people aligned with Zhang advocated for “collective leadership and more internal democratic decision-making” in what was a thinly disguised rebuke to Xi's highly centralized leadership. Nevertheless, Zhang survived last October's purge.

Whatever the actual wrongdoings of Zhang and Xi's motives for his removal, the ongoing purge of the Chinese military only underscores the fragility of the CCP regime, which has been intensified by the Trump administration. As Beijing understands very well, Trump's ultimate target is China, the world's second largest economy, which Washington regards as the chief threat to the global hegemony of US imperialism.

Trump reached a temporary truce last year in his economic war of tariffs and hi-tech export bans against China after Beijing imposed restrictions on the export of rare earths that had the potential to cripple key industries, including military production, in the US. He is due to meet with Xi in China in April. But Trump's criminal actions against Venezuela and military threats against Iran menace two of China's key suppliers of oil—in effect a continuation of the US economic war through other means.

In the face of steep US tariffs, China has found other markets for its exports but its economy is still plagued by high levels of debt and a crisis-ridden property market. Economic growth last year was officially 5 percent, but that figure is well below the benchmark 8 percent previously regarded as necessary for low unemployment and social stability. The huge social gulf between the tiny oligarchy of multi-billionaires that the CCP above all represents and the vast majority of the population is a continuing source of resentment, hostility and outright opposition.

The fact that Xi concludes that it is necessary to move against his closest ally in the military is not a sign of political strength, but rather presages political instability in his regime.



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