



## **Purging the military corps of its rotten core** by James Char

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Just when China's present crop of military leaders were attending a performance of "Building the Great War with Flesh and Blood" to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the People's Anti-Japanese War and the War Against Fascism organized by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), a real drama within the Chinese military was unfolding for its former top soldier.

On July 30, rumors that Guo Boxiong, a former vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) – China's highest military decisionmaking body – had been implicated in the anti-graft dragnet were finally confirmed. Following a decision by the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Politburo, it was announced that Guo had been expelled from the party and his case was transferred to prosecutors within the military.

### **Confirming Suspicions Regarding Hu's Reign**

The sacking of Guo Boxiong from the CCP follows that of the expulsion of former vice chairman, Xu Caihou, last June. Respectively nicknamed the "Northwest Wolf" and the "Northeast Tiger" in reference to the military regions (MRs) they had risen from, Guo and Xu – the latter having since died from bladder cancer this March – are believed to have used their positions to promote military personnel in accordance with bids put up by their subordinates. Successful bidders purportedly had to satisfy both CMC deputies before advancing their careers.

Despite the announcement of an official inquiry into the alleged dealings of Guo's son – Maj. Gen. Guo Zhenggang – in March, and speculation spawned by official media that suggested that the purge of Guo Boxiong was imminent, there were scant signs to suggest that the senior Guo would be caught up in the anti-corruption campaign anytime soon. Especially in light of the muted sentencing of the former Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member, Zhou Yongkang, behind closed doors, rumors had begun swirling that Guo would be spared prosecution by the PLA's procuratorate and courts.

The CCP's decision to make the downfall of Guo Boxiong official confirms what China watchers have known all along: that the previous Chinese military leadership – nominally headed by former CMC chairman Hu Jintao, but controlled by

men loyal to Jiang Zemin – was rotten to the core. Indeed, Hu's ineffectual tenure as CMC chairman from 2004 to 2012 must have served as an example for Xi Jinping how *not* to be commander-in-chief of China's 2.3 million-strong forces. As a vice chair of the CMC between 2010 and 2012 himself, Xi would have had a front row seat to watch dynamics within the PLA's top decision-making body.

### **Xi Consolidates His Control of the Gun**

Throughout the CCP's history – from Mao's successful purges of his generals during the Cultural Revolution to the support afforded Deng Xiaoping in crushing protests in Tiananmen Square – party leaders had been propped up on many an occasion by virtue of their control over the military. Like his predecessors, Xi Jinping's consolidation of power and his success in restructuring the various party and state organs would not have been possible without first asserting his personal control over the PLA, and to a lesser extent, the country's public security apparatus.

In achieving the latter, Xi has used his anti-graft movement to purge the Chinese state security organs of the influence of previous officeholders, in addition to relegating the position of chief of the Central Political and Law Commission (CPLC) – Zhou Yongkang's former stronghold – to that of a non-PBSC rank. Over time, former CPLC staffers under Zhou have been deposed, with the most recent high-profile case being that of former Hebei party secretary Zhou Benshun.

Where the military is concerned, Xi has coordinated efforts between the inspection cum discipline organs under his CMC and Wang Qishan's Central Discipline and Inspection Committee (CDIC) in rooting out high-ranking military tigers. This may explain how Guo junior could have been promoted to major general in January, only to be indicted the following month. Furthermore, Xi has also been observed to be appointing associates from Fujian and Zhejiang to important positions within the PLA, as well as other key party organs.

### **Personal Authority Comes to the Fore**

Unlike Mao and Deng, the lack of revolutionary credentials on the part of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao meant that it was a daunting challenge for them to impose their will on China's military leaders. Without the political privileges enjoyed by his predecessors, it is believed that Jiang Zemin resorted to other means to solicit the allegiance of subordinates within the military, such as the use of promotions in exchange for loyalty in addition to putting in key military posts his most trusted aides. Indeed, toward the end of Hu Jintao's tenure, the number of generals in China numbered around 200.

Following the interregnum from Jiang to Hu, personal authority has come to the fore yet again since the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. With his Princeling pedigree and experience in the

Nanjing MR while he was party secretary and governor of Zhejiang and Fujian respectively, Xi Jinping feels himself equal to the task of reforming the PLA. His attempts at dismantling the patronage networks and arresting widespread corruption within the Chinese military can be attributed to his desire to avoid Hu Jintao's fate. More crucially, Xi has begun to remove the corrupt underpinnings of the PLA and signaled his resolve to develop it into a force capable of fighting wars – and winning them.

Aided by his Hu's 'naked exit' in relinquishing all posts in the party-state-military nexus, Xi has taken the first meaningful steps to reshape China's civil-military relations. We can only hope that he does not follow in Jiang's footsteps by the time his tenure ends in 2022.

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