



## ***XI JINPING'S LATEST PURGE AND "CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS"***

***BY ROB YORK***

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Last week, former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol (2022-25) [received](#) a life sentence for leading an insurrection in connection to his aborted martial law declaration in December 2024.

Most Western analyses of the recent purge of two People's Liberation Army (PLA) four-star generals (上将) treat this development as something shocking. Chinese Communist Party Chairman Xi Jinping has been accused of [paranoia](#), and the power of the Chinese Communist Party Central Military Commission (CCP CMC) is supposed to be [crumbling](#).

Western voices tend to focus on the role of ideology within the PLA, and are quick to detect signs of internal fragmentation, but the downfall of these officers needs to be examined from the perspective of "Chinese characteristics."

Gen. Zhang Youxia (張又俠), first vice chairman of the CCP CMC, and Gen. Liu Zhenli (刘振立), chief of staff of the Joint Staff Department of the CMC, were arrested in late January, and accused of "grave violations of discipline and law," i.e. corruption. Both were prominent representatives of the PLA in the National People's Congress, and Zhang Youxia had been close to Xi Jinping since their childhood as "princelings" (太子党).

This remarkable purge is the climax of President Xi's anti-corruption campaign, and leaves the CMC with only two members remaining: Gen. Zhang Shengmin (张升民), second vice chairman, and Xi Jinping himself, as chairman.

### **What led to this latest purge?**

Since 2012, Xi has been trying to create a strong modernized army, employing the slogan of "fight and win," with the aim of building a world class military by 2049. Xi's plan means persuading the PLA to abandon their historical and ideological privileges, and instead sustaining the morale and fighting spirit of the troops by developing advanced modern doctrines and strategy.

This latest purge appears unlike Xi's earlier ones, and may have resulted from a different set of drivers, most importantly a conflict over the combat readiness principles required to execute a Taiwan military operation in 2027, which encompasses joint operations concepts, education, training, operations manuals, and doctrines for on-scene commanders. Given its timing, this [conflict](#) between Xi and Zhang may perhaps have been exacerbated by the sudden unexpected and strikingly successful US military operation, Absolute Resolve, in which Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro was [captured](#) on Jan. 3.

In 2023, Xi [reportedly issued](#) an operational directive to the PLA: "If the Taiwan authorities declare independence, ensure that by 2027 all combat readiness preparations are perfectly in place so that rapid military means can be applied against Taiwan." This date is, not coincidentally, politically crucial for Xi, who expects the 2027 21st CCP congress to grant him a fourth term as president. Despite this directive, however, those generals with war-fighting experience, including Zhang Youxia, have continued to question the feasibility of the PLA achieving this capability by 2027. Nevertheless, Chairman Xi kept Gen. Zhang Youxia in place, despite widespread speculation that he would be replaced, especially after Zhang's protégé, Minister of National Defense Li Shangfu (李尚福), was purged on Oct. 24, 2023, over alleged bribe-taking regarding military procurement.

### **Chinese characteristics and this latest purge**

This episode needs to be interpreted through the lens of the distinctive "Chinese characteristics" whereby the PLA is subject to civilian control: What it means for the PLA to function as a "party-army," the competing views on whether the party (黨) or the military (軍) truly "controls" the PLA, and the acute conflict within the CCP elite over the egregious capability gap between the

PLA and the US Armed Forces, so starkly demonstrated by Operation Absolute Resolve. Can the PLA plausibly copy the structure and operational patterns of the US military, and should they?

The Chinese military is under the auspices of the CCP, and so is under civilian control. In effect, the PLA is the armed wing of the CCP, not of the Chinese state. Thus, the CCP general secretary serves concurrently as chairman of the CMC, whose membership includes serving senior generals. Chairman Xi has reinforced CCP control by [implementing](#) a “Chairman Responsibility System” which consolidated his absolute, personal control over the PLA, elevating his authority over military decisions, strategic planning, and personnel. This change was resisted by Gen. Zhang Youxia, who preferred to retain a decentralized collective responsibility system, thereby undermining the CCP’s absolute leadership over the military and hindering the implementation of Xi’s directives.

As implied by its formal name, the PLA claims to embody “people’s democracy” and therefore must be seen to serve the CCP. The CCP has always exercised firm control of party-army relations, so that a general’s position within the CCP hierarchy takes precedence over his military rank, both formally and in practice. Gen. Zhang Youxia has questioned the dominance of the party over the army, specifically regarding the progress of Chairman Xi’s unrelenting anti-corruption campaign, which Zhang reportedly attempted to moderate.

Xi is determined to hold the line that the PLA serves the CCP, and he is the paramount leader of the CCP in a way which has not been seen since Mao Zedong. Xi will not allow any shift towards a Western concept of an army which serves the state: Chinese characteristics are indispensable to his vision of the PLA, and indeed to preserving his personal power.

### What next for the PLA?

This latest purge should be seen as part and parcel of Xi’s long-term plans for the Chinese military: completing PLA reform by 2035 and building a world-class military by 2049. His 2016 reforms marked the most significant restructuring of the Chinese military since 1949, transforming it from a defense-oriented, army-centric organization into a force structure capable of joint offensives. These reforms were intended to root out corrupt links between the military regions (MRs), local politicians, and state-owned defense industries, and to build capability for denial of external threats, including US expeditionary forces. The core of this transition was [replacing](#) the seven legacy MRs with five [theater commands](#), (TCs) designed to enable joint operations which integrate the army, navy, air force, and rocket force across all combat domains: land, sea, air, space, and cyber.

The next generation of PLA generals will need to secure Xi’s trust, and it is an open question how they will seek to achieve his confidence. Some [commentators](#) expect China to reduce its military pressure on Taiwan, following the purge of the last generals with actual combat experience, but it is also possible that the new military leaders may intensify exercises around Taiwan to demonstrate their resolve to their commander-in-chief. Likewise in the Yellow Sea: when Gen. Zhang commanded the Shenyang MR (now replaced by the Northern TC), he favored maintaining the Yellow Sea, in which US Forces Korea also operate, as a buffer zone. It is entirely possible that new commanders of the Northern TC could see this region as a test case to extend the Chinese sphere of influence.

### Conclusion

So-called “socialism with Chinese characteristics” is fundamental to Chairman Xi’s vision, driving his political, economic and military approach to government. However, many observers take the view that these same Chinese characteristics, specifically prioritizing political loyalty over operational competence, and centralized control over mission command, are inevitably in tension with President Xi’s attempts to transform the PLA into a world-class military.

President Xi’s attempt to square this circle will depend on the appointment of senior officers to replace those recently purged, and this is expected after the annual plenary session of the CCP, in the autumn. The way in which they seek to demonstrate their loyalty may have momentous consequences: for Taiwan, for the Korean Peninsula, and for the wider world.

*The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to [rob@pacforum.org](mailto:rob@pacforum.org) for more information on how to contribute.*