



21 January 2024

'INDICATION OF DISARRAY IN PLA AND IMMINENT 'RECTIFICATION' CAMPAIGN'

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The senior echelons of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) appear to be in disarray. The unexplained long absences of Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia and sudden removal of Defence Minister Li Shangfu, both with close family ties to Chinese President Xi Jinping, has added to the state of uncertainty. Many senior officers have also in recent months been removed on charges of corruption or violation of political discipline. In addition, a usually reliable report claims that the PLA has conveyed to Xi Jinping that it is not ready for an invasion of Taiwan. It is almost certain that the PLA will be subjected to a thorough 'cleansing' or rectification centering on corruption and political reliability.

2. Ever since China's former Defence Minister General Li Shangfu suddenly disappeared from public view in September last year, there has been persistent speculation as to why he disappeared and who would replace him. Speculation was heightened because of Li Shangfu's close family connections with Chinese President Xi Jinping and the equally sudden and, as yet, unexplained disappearance earlier in July of China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang – another protégé of Xi Jinping. There have subsequently been indications that they were probably guilty of corruption and violating Party discipline. Interestingly though, both retain their position as members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC). Li Shangfu was formally divested of his post as Defence Minister in October 2023, but it took another 3 months before former PLA Navy Commander General Dong Jun was appointed the new Defence Minister in December 2023. The appointment for the first time of a former PLA Navy Commander as Defence Minister has raised fresh questions about the PLA Ground Force and PLA Rocket Force. At the same time, because of the long absence of CMC Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia from April to September and again intermittently for long stretches there is speculation that his relations with Xi Jinping are under strain. Coverage of the study session on promoting high-quality financial development at the Central Party School in Beijing on January 16, by the state-owned CCTV also showed Zhang Youxia sitting on the third and last row behind General He Weidong, which is quite unusual.

3. While corruption is known to have been rampant in the PLA for decades, immediately after taking over as Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) Xi Jinping had subjected it to successive year-long ideological and anti-corruption campaigns. The new, major, emphasis on modernisation and all-round technological upgradation of the PLA meant that huge sums of money would have been made available to the PLA. The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) particularly has been the recipient of large sums because of the effort to increase its inventory

of missiles, induct new types of missiles and build numerous underground silos. The removal of officers in defence scientific establishments associated with the PLA Equipment Development Department confirms that they too have been involved in corruption. Xi Jinping will have been angered that corruption on such a large scale persists despite his unprecedented anti-corruption campaign in the PLA, which by 2017 had resulted in the dismissal of over 40% of its officer corps on charges of corruption. It implies that the reporting and supervision mechanism put in place has not functioned and the PLA has resisted the Party's efforts to supervise it. The PLA Daily Editorial of January 1, 2024, gave priority to fighting corruption and mentioned 'corruption' three times.

4. Meanwhile, the Commander and Political Commissar of the secretive People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force, General Li Yuchao and General Xu Zhongbo respectively, were removed from their posts and placed under investigation for corruption. Reliable reports said that the amount involved an estimated US\$ 2 billion. On December 29, the NPC removed nine senior PLA officers from their posts. Five of those removed were past or current commanders of the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF). In June 2023, Rocket Force Commander Li Yuchao, who had earlier overseen exercises for launching a nuclear counter-strike after coming under nuclear attack, Rocket Force Commissar Xu Zhongbo, and his deputies Liu Guangbin and Zhang Zhenzhong were all removed from their positions. While no official cause was given, speculative rumours have pointed to embezzlement and espionage and leakage by Li Yuchao's son of government secrets to the United States while studying abroad. In July, a former deputy of the Rocket Force and head of the secretive Third Department Wu Guohua died under mysterious circumstances. In July 2023, Ju Qiansheng, Commander of the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) and member of the Third Department, went missing amid investigations of misconduct. In September, there was a major shakeup as Cheng Dongfang, head of the PLA Military Court and Li Shangfu, the Defense Minister, were removed from their positions. Former PLARF Commander Zhou Yaning, Head of the PLARF Armaments Department Lu Hong, and former PLARF deputy Li Chuanguang were all removed. Commander of the Southern Theater Navy Ju Xinchun and former PLAAF Commander Ding Laihang, who has pushed for pilots to get more realistic training, were also removed from their positions. Interesting was the dismissal of PLA Equipment Development Department officials Zhang Yulin, and Rao Wenmin. By early January 2024 nearly 15 senior PLARF officers had been removed from their posts and placed under investigation.

5. The names of the 15 PLA RF officers removed from their posts are given below:

Name	Title	Date of Public Removal
Zhang Yulin	Former deputy director of General Armament Department, predecessor of EDD	Dec. 29, 2023
Rao Wenmin	Member of EDD	Dec. 29, 2023
Zhou Yaning	Former commander of Rocket Force	Dec. 29, 2023

Name	Title	Date of Public Removal
Zhang Zhenzhong	Former commander of Rocket Force; deputy chief of joint staff department of Central Military Commission since at least 2022	Dec. 29, 2023
Li Chuanguang	Deputy commander of Rocket Force since at least 2018	Dec. 29, 2023
Lyu Hong	Member of Rocket Force	Dec. 29, 2023
Ju Xinchun	Worked as Li Shangfu's deputy in China's manned space program; navy commander of Southern Theater Command since February	Dec. 29, 2023
Ding Laihang	Former commander of Air Force	Dec. 29, 2023
Wu Yansheng	Chairman of China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp	Dec. 27, 2023
Liu Shiquan	Former executive at China Aerospace Science & Industry Corp; chairman of China North Industries Group Corp	Dec. 27, 2023
Wang Changqing	Executive at China Aerospace Science & Industry Corp	Dec. 27, 2023
Li Tongjian	Major-general of Rocket Force	Nov. 24, 2023
Li Shangfu	Former director of EDD; former defense minister; CMC member	Oct. 24, 2023
Li Yuchao	Former commander of Rocket Force	Jul. 31, 2023
Xu Zhongbo		

(The list has been compiled by Bloomberg on January 4.)

6. An analyst for Cercius Group, a Canadian geopolitical consulting firm, told Asia Sentinel that the numbers were considerably higher. He claimed "So far, we have been able to track down around 70 individuals who have been taken away within the larger frame of the Rocket Force

investigation. As of yet, we believe, considering that procurement, and logistics are also involved, it is still too early to inquire about the results of the ongoing crackdown.”

7. It is unusual for China’s official media to report on misdeeds in the PLA, but a series of articles, some authored by PLA officers, appeared in China’s official newspapers pointing to ideological and discipline problems in the PLA. At least six such articles were noticed between mid-November and mid-January. On December 6, 2023, Chen Zuosong, Director of the Political Work Department for the Southern Theatre Command Air Force, published an article in the Study Times, the official newspaper of the Central Party School. In the Study Times article Chen Zuosong bluntly declared that “hostile forces” are exerting more influence in China, leading to the spread of misguided ideas in the military. Outlining the ideological risks facing the PLA, Chen Zuosong called for a culture of “absolute loyalty” to the ruling Communist Party and said “the changes in information technology have brought an increasing number of variables and hidden dangers to the ideological field” and “Hostile forces have increased cognitive penetration and destruction, and various erroneous ideological trends and arguments have ... spread into military camps.” He asserted that the military should be patient and confident, and loyal to both the party and Xi.

8. Soon thereafter the Guangming Daily (January 14) published an article by the 'Research Center for Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military', which emphasised that “Political army building is the primary and fundamental issue in the construction and development of the people’s army”. It added that Chinese President Xi Jinping has clearly stated that “political army building is the foundation of our army”. The article explained the five points of political thought on army building. It listed them as: (i) “The Party’s absolute leadership over the military is an essential feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics, an important political advantage of the Party and the country, and the foundation of the people’s military and the soul of a strong military. It said the PLA must stick to this most fundamental issue”; (ii) “The Chairman's Responsibility System of the Military Commission is the fundamental system and form that upholds the Party's absolute leadership over the military. It solves the issue of the supreme leadership and command authority of our military. It must be observed as the highest political requirement and maintained by the highest political discipline”; (iii) “Upholding the party's absolute leadership over the military is guaranteed by the party committee system, the dual-chief system, the political committee system, etc. These are an institutional arrangement and a political design that must be consistently adhered to”; (iv) to meet the political standard of "absolute", the “army is armed with guns, and its loyalty to the party must be sole, complete, unconditional, unadulterated, and without any moisture”; and (v) “Political discipline and political rules must be strict and solid, and the four fundamental things of ideals and beliefs, party spirit principles, combat effectiveness standards, and political work prestige must be firmly established in the entire military. Building the party style and clean government and the fight against corruption must always be promoted”.

9. Writing in the PLA Daily (January 17) Luo Jiale of the PLA Air Force 107th Regiment of the 36th Bomber Division of the Central Theatre Air Force, picked up on the theme of ideological and discipline problems in the PLA mentioned by the Director of the Political Work Department for the Southern Theatre Command Air Force in his article in the Study Times. Underscoring that there is increased pressure on the army and that officers and men need to work efficiently and hard, he regretted, "there are still some officers and soldiers who are

unwilling to push, take their time, and either go with the flow, stepping on the watermelon rind and sliding wherever they go." He emphasised that PLA officers must develop a sense of purpose and urgency.

10. There were at least three, lengthy hard-hitting articles on corruption. The article captioned 'Seeing corruption and power-seeking as a great disgrace' by PLA officer Han Deming described corruption "as the biggest cancer that harms the vitality and combat effectiveness of the party", adding that the "abuse of power for personal gain and corruption" is a "great shame". It recalled that Xi Jinping at the 20th Party Congress and earlier Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Peng Dehuai had all spoken out against corruption and privilege. The article warned "Greed is like fire, if it is not contained it will start a prairie fire; desire is like water, if it is not contained it will surge to the sky. For party members and cadres, especially leading cadres, if they break a rule once, they will leave a stain; if they do something special, they will lose a point of prestige; if they seek personal gain once, they will lose a piece of people's hearts." It regretted "there are still some party members and cadres who defy the rules and regulations for personal gain, engage in corruption by trying the law, cannot control themselves and their families, and ultimately lose in the battle between loyalty and betrayal". It said "Party members and cadres, especially leading cadres, must always be strict with themselves and guard the line of defense against corruption and degeneration. They must not indulge themselves by saying "little things are fine", forgive themselves by "not being an example", or be paralyzed by "no one knows"." It acknowledged that "Party members and cadres do not live in a vacuum" and "human interference, ideological infiltration, and "hunting" by people with ulterior motives are everywhere". It said "party members and cadres, especially leading cadres, must be particularly clear-headed and firm in attitude, and often compare themselves with each other."

11. Another article by Fan Jing of the 'Research Center on Xi Jinping's Thought on Strengthening the Military' titled 'The essence of corruption is the abuse of power —— Promoting comprehensive and strict governance of the Party and the military' bluntly declared that "Corruption is the deadliest "source of pollution". It said it is "the biggest cancer that harms the party's vitality and combat effectiveness, the greatest threat our party faces, and the "number one killer" of combat effectiveness." Asserting that it is necessary to guard against the abuse of power, it cited examples of 'old comrades' who had not succumbed to the temptation of misusing power to benefit their families. Stating that "Power without supervision will inevitably lead to corruption", it insisted that supervision is imperative. Appearing to hint at resistance among some Party cadres to supervision, it said "Every party member and leading cadre should regard supervision as the greatest concern, the best protection, and the most sincere help and be willing to accept supervision and develop the habit of working and living in an environment subject to supervision and restraint".

12. In apparent escalation of the level of warnings, the People's Daily (January 12) published a Commentary on eliminating corruption in the PLA. It emphasised that "The fight against corruption must be a protracted one." It warned that "Corruption is the biggest cancer that harms the vitality and combat effectiveness of the party, and is the biggest threat our party faces. If corruption is allowed to spread, the party and the country will eventually be destroyed. The fight against corruption is a "must answer" for comprehensive and strict governance of the party. It is a serious political task and a major political responsibility that

we must grasp well.” It indicated that the campaign against corruption has no time limit and said: “The anti-corruption struggle can only be ongoing and never completed; the anti-corruption struggle must be accomplished over a long period of time and cannot be accomplished once and for all”. It said this is necessary to “ensure that the party will never deteriorate and the red country will never change colour”. Indicating that a rigorous anti-corruption campaign is likely in the army, it said “The military is armed with guns, and corruption cannot have a place in the party, especially in our military. The more powerful the military is in fighting corruption, the purer and more effective it will be. The entire military must thoroughly study and implement the spirit of Chairman Xi’s important speeches and Chairman Xi’s important thoughts on the Party’s self-revolution, continuously deepen the understanding of the laws of the Party’s self-revolution, make the Party’s self-revolution ideas and measures more rigorous, and solidly promote Strict governance of the Party and the military will be developed in an all-round way”.

13. Earlier that day (January 12) at the annual meeting of the PLA’s disciplinary inspectors, CMC Vice Chairman General He Weidong warned “[We must] always adhere to a strict tone, use stricter standards to scrutinise the key few, and show determination to get to the bottom of long-standing [corruption] problems”. He also stressed the need for the CMC’s Commission for Discipline Inspection to keep an eye on political loyalty and support for President Xi Jinping. He Weidong said it is essential to tighten the party’s governance and political responsibilities, strengthen political supervision, deepen political rectification, firmly support the “Two Establishments,” resolutely uphold the “Two Maintenances,” and comprehensively implement Xi Jinping’s responsibility system of the Military Commission. He said it is necessary to use stricter standards and have a zero-tolerance attitude to comprehensively promote the prevention of corruption, the incapability of corruption, and the unwillingness to be corrupt and establish a solid ideological dam.

14. Despite persistent efforts since 2013, Xi Jinping has been unable to eliminate corruption from the PLA and the supervision system put in place does not seem to have worked. More troubling for Xi Jinping would be that all the senior officers were promoted by him and even persons close to him, like Li Shangfu, are among the officers removed from their positions. It is almost certain that the PLA will be subjected to a rigorous campaign to eradicate corruption and reinforce the PLA’s political reliability and ideological commitment.

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