

IMPLICATIONS OF PLA TOP BRASS ZHANG YOUXIA'S PURGE ON INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

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The ouster of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli on January 24, 2026, two of the senior-most officials who were considered close to Xi Jinping and were chosen by him to lead the Central Military Commission (CMC) for almost a decade, has come as a surprise for other powers watching China's military developments, given that they were two of only a handful of senior officers in the PLA with combat experience. This follows the purge of other senior officials like Miao Hua and He Weidong, who had been disbanded earlier. The ouster of these two senior generals has brought down the composition of the CMC to just two members, Xi Jinping himself and General Zhang Shengmin, which would otherwise, in normal circumstances, be composed of seven members. While the narrative is ostensibly built around discipline violation and removing corruption in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), there are myriad actual reasons, from leaking nuclear secrets to the United States to plotting a coup

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and factional infighting or even rumours of a gunfight in Beijing.¹ These purges are not only indicative of the auguring of a new leadership, that is, the central leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has recently signalled that a new crop of people are now on the cusp of taking charge of the PLA, but also reflective of huge differences among the top brass on Xi Jinping's intent to re-unite Taiwan by force. By and large, the purges reiterate the Party's clear stance of 'no forbidden zones, full coverage, and zero tolerance' in its anti-corruption drive. This paper looks at the factors affecting these purges and what this symbolises as far as India and its neighbourhood are concerned.

SHEDDING FEATHERS AND REBIRTH: THE CHURN WITHIN THE PLA

According to the various reports in the Chinese media, Zhang Youxia as the vice-chairman of the CMC, failed to deliver in line with Xi Jinping's expectations. Zhang was largely accused of corruption tied to capability-building, and performance failures as the PLA moved toward its centenary in 2027. Other reasons included failures to rein in close associates, family members, and relatives, as well as shortcomings in identifying and flagging problems in the Party leadership at an early stage. The purge is consistent with Xi Jinping's goal to root out corruption from the PLA, as stated in its official policies of pursuing a resolute struggle to eliminate major political hidden dangers (重大政治隐患), a 'heavy plow and deep tilling' (重犁深耕) to eradicate the soil and conditions that breed corruption, which basically describes the nature of the anti-corruption campaign in the PLA. The fact that though Zhang's father was a revolutionary comrade of Xi's father and both families trace their roots back to Shaanxi province as 'princelings', but it made no difference to Xi Jinping, indicates that, at least, in principle, nobody is above the law.

The *PLA Daily*, on February 2, 2026, reported that the investigation of Zhang Youxia also symbolises the complete elimination of senior

1. Stephen McDonell, "China has Purged its Highest-Ranked Military General. Why?", *BBC*, January 27, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8d010g8yz5o>. Accessed on February 6, 2026.

generals with “second-generation red” backgrounds from the leadership of the CMC.² Within a few hours of its publication in the *PLA Daily*, the ouster of these two top generals attracted comments from several Party members from all over China, reflecting an attitude subservient to the Party, with most people demanding and supporting the removal of corrupt officials. There was huge support from the public, bold, angry, and unsparing in demanding that severe punishment to be meted out to corrupt military personnel at all levels. The Party announced this purge to be a huge success, claiming:

The resolute investigation and handling of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli is a major achievement in comprehensively strictly governing the Party and a major victory in the anti-corruption struggle. It is an important manifestation of the Party and the military having determination and strength, and is of great significance for promoting the PLA to uproot the sources of pernicious influence/lingering poison (拔除流毒根源) and to achieve a shedding of feathers and rebirth (换羽重生).³

This implies that the old guard has now been done away with, and a new generation is now taking charge. The Chinese media described it in a typically traditional fashion using language like “*the faster the speed of removing the rot, the faster the speed of generating new flesh.*”

The emphasis on reining in corruption, however, remains strong even under the new recruits. The leadership has sternly pointed out that,

Currently, although we must face some short-term difficulties and pains, it is necessary to more deeply recognise that the fundamental principle and system of the Party’s absolute leadership over the military is playing a decisive role, and the strategic design, path

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2. *PLA Daily* Commentary, February 2, 2026, <https://news.sina.cn/gn/2026-02-02/detail-inhkkqui7578661.d.html?oid=>, Translated by ICS, <https://icsin.org/uploads/2026/02/06/5e5c68390ffb8062d3d3503936f32b93.pdf>. Accessed on February 3, 2026.
 3. *PLA Daily* Commentary on Purge of Zhang Youxia & Liu Zhenli: “‘Special Tempering’ Underway; ‘Diseased Trees’ Being Uprooted; & New-Era Officers to Take Charge”, *Tracking People’s Daily*, January 31, 2026, <https://trackingpeoplesdaily.substack.com/p/pla-daily-editorial-on-purge-of-zhang>. Accessed on February 4, 2026.

arrangements, and target tasks for advancing toward world-class status have already become the entire military's shared understanding and common action.⁴

According to Manoj Kewalramani, these purges are likely to generate significant unease among the folks who have risen under Zhang's patronage. It has also been indicated that the new generation that is now going to take charge of the PLA comprises those who have directly been trained under Xi Jinping. This can be deduced from references to his earlier days, for instance,

This army of ours, which marched forth from the Nanchang city walls and was forged in the flames of war, is currently undergoing a special kind of tempering, just like removing impurities when refining steel, this is re-strengthening, re-purifying, re-casting, and re-cohering.⁵

These purges also reinforce the command structure within the PLA as complete loyalty to the PLA and the Party is re-emphasised. The national media rhetoric repeatedly called for the need "to deeply advance political rectification and training, correct unhealthy tendencies, enforce strict discipline and fight corruption, carry forward the thorough spirit of self-revolution, as well as vigorously restore and promote the glorious traditions and fine work styles of our Party and military"⁶ and by doing this, implement the Chairman Responsibility System of the CMC under Xi Jinping's command (which Zhang Youxia was accused of trampling on).

Many experts are of the opinion that Zhang's and Liu's downfall, along with the wild speculation, highlights two things: that "Xi remains unassailable and that there are significant limits to information in

4. Manoj Kewalramani, "Xi's Beijing Inspection—Li Qiang Message to Red Army Descendants & on Rare Earths—Taiwan Affairs Work Conference—Hong Kong National Security White Paper—India-China Dialogue", *Tracking People's Daily* February 11, 2026, https://open.substack.com/pub/trackingpeoplesdaily/p/xis-beijing-inspection-li-qiang-message?utm_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm_medium=web. Accessed on February 13, 2026.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

Beijing which fuels uncertainty and feeds this speculation” (Chong Ja Ian from the National University of Singapore). Many others also attest this belief as Xi Jinping remains the only president to hold three strong positions of the CCP general secretary, the CMC chairman and the president of China at the same time. Jayadeva Ranade, senior military expert in India believes that the top generals were actually not in line with Xi’s designs on the ‘re-unification’ of Taiwan by force by 2027,⁷ the standoff with Japan, and the territorial dispute with India, and confronted Xi on the latter’s plans for a fourth term as general secretary and, hence, were removed from their positions so that Xi’s ideas could be carried out without any opposition.⁸ The purge will likely affect operational decisions as Xi Jinping makes it absolutely clear that even though ‘power runs from the barrel of the gun’ it is the Party that holds the gun here and, hence, everyone is expected to be subservient to the civilian leadership. “Political disloyalty is a cardinal sin inside the Party”⁹ and Xi Jinping is indeed not in the mood for an ‘*et tu brute*’ moment with any of his close confidantes. On the other hand, there are also experts who speculate that these removals can have adverse effects in the event of an all-out attack on Taiwan by China. These removals have also hampered the possibility of speculation amongst outsiders on the capability and strength of the new rung of leadership that will rise to the helm of affairs.

Meanwhile, the ouster has been followed by a nationalist drive of assuaging domestic concerns as well as justifying the leadership’s stance on nationalist sentiments abroad. This is perceptible in the ways that China has offered firm support for “patriotic pro-reunification forces” in Taiwan and striking hard against the “separatists”. Sources close to the political establishment have revealed that China has decided to immediately go full throttle on Taiwan since the ouster

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7. Li Shangyi, “Mainland Refuses to Renounce Force in its Pursuit of Reunification with Taiwan,” *China Daily*, January 28, 2026, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202601/28/WS6979ebf5a310d6866eb3640e.html>. Accessed on February 14, 2026.
 8. Personal discussion during podcast; for more see, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3cax0n2Pk0>
 9. Janis Mackey Frayer, Yuliya Talmazan and Dan de Luce, “Purge of top Chinese General Throws Military into Turmoil, Raises Questions About Taiwan”, *NBC News*, January 26, 2026, <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/china/china-xi-jinping-general-zhang-corruption-purge-taiwan-invasion-rcna255911>. Accessed on February 14, 2026.

of the old Gang, and ramped up its military and political pressure against the island as Beijing seeks to reassert its sovereignty claims.¹⁰ However, overall, this reflects Beijing's concealed anxiety as more and more generals are being accused of 'unpatriotic conduct' intended to discipline elite dissent, the rank and file, and the wider military community.¹¹

REMOVALS AND THE US-TAIWAN FACTOR

The removals have ignited some unforeseen reactions from the US as well, since it has been involved in the Taiwan affairs. The US circulated some funny videos aimed at recruiting officers who had deserted from the PLA to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Titled "Save the Future", the video was posted on YouTube and other social media platforms to further the goal of recruitment. In the clip, the narrator was seen as a fictional mid-level military officer disheartened by the condition in the country. He laments, "The only thing our Party leaders are interested in defending is their own pockets".¹² CIA Director John Ratcliffe attested how the CIA was increasingly inclined to recruit from the Chinese by exploiting Xi's intensifying crackdown on the country's military leadership as China is a strategic threat and would be a top priority for the agency. Since 2023, Beijing has ousted over 20 senior military officials and the CIA sees this as a good opportunity to rebuild its network in China after

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10. Addressing the "Taiwan Work Conference" in 2026, Wang Huning said officials must advance the "great cause of national reunification...it is necessary to firmly support the patriotic pro-unification forces on the island, resolutely strike against 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces, oppose interference by external forces and safeguard peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait"; News Desk, "China to Support 'Reunification Forces' in Taiwan, go after 'Separatists'," *CPEC NEWS*, February 10, 2026, <https://cpecnews.com/china-to-support-reunification-forces-in-taiwan-go-after-separatists/>. Accessed on February 13, 2026.
 11. Atul Kumar, "Paper Tigers of PLA: Xi Dismantles China's Central Military Commission", *Observer Research Foundation*, January 27, 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/paper-tigers-of-pla-xi-dismantles-china-s-central-military-commission>. Accessed on February 16, 2026.
 12. "As Xi Jinping Purges His Commanders, CIA Sees Opening In Beijing's Barracks", *NDTV*, February 13, 2026, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/as-chinese-president-xi-jinping-purges-his-commanders-united-states-central-intelligence-agency-cia-sees-opening-in-beijings-barracks-10997338>. Accessed on February 15, 2026.

the US lost a string of spies as part of a two-year counter-intelligence campaign starting in 2010.

The issue of sharing nuclear secrets and core technical data related to China's nuclear weapons programme with the US, besides accepting bribes for promotion of officers was also considered one of the reasons for the purge of the two generals.¹³ China has always been vocal about Taiwan and actively promotes its agenda for reunification on the international stage. With the mayoral and county magistrate elections at the end of the year in Taiwan, China has warned the US against meddling in the Taiwan issue, which it said is its internal affair. These elections are important in the sense that they will signal Party support ahead of the next presidential and parliamentary elections in early 2028. In December last year, the US announced its largest-ever weapons package for the island worth US\$ 11.1 billion, indicating that it will continue to support the island in the near future. Taiwan is intricately integrated in the US chip market, and, hence, the local Taiwanese businessmen often call for a greater role of the US in the politics of the island, especially its support against the pressures from the mainland. There are, however, some speculations that the US will not interfere in the Taiwan peninsula after the geopolitical spinoffs of the Venezuela crisis and the Greenland debate at home. The US did not interfere with the Russia-Ukraine War which bolsters China's ambitions to integrate Taiwan, and raises its expectations that the US will remain entangled in its own domestic affairs. The US' new focus on consolidating influence in the Western hemisphere, then leaves China a free hand in the Taiwan Strait and the South and East China Seas.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD

Zhang's removal is the second of a sitting general on the Central Military Commission since the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution. This

13. "After Ousting Top General, China's PLA says 'Numerous Factors' and Affecting the CPC's Absolute Control Over Military", *The Economic Times*, February 2, 2026, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/after-ousting-top-general-chinas-pla-says-numerous-factors-affecting-cpcs-absolute-control-over-military/articleshow/127865645.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst. Accessed on February 15, 2026.

purge, while internal to China, has ramifications for the larger South Asian geopolitical calculus and can shape strategic dynamics in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific in several ways:

PLA Cohesion and Combat Effectiveness

The PLA's misuse of funds was evident in the way China's military faced budgetary shortages post Galwan. Accounted for a loss of around US\$ 150 billion to the Chinese side, the border skirmishes proved to be costly.¹⁴ For India, it may have serious implications, as military leadership instability can slow China's strategic decision-making and operational coordination. A destabilised leadership corps may mean less predictable PLA behaviour near India, whether along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) or in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Conversely, centralised control under Xi could mean more top-down authoritarian decision-making with fewer internal constraints which may heighten risks in crises. For India, both outcomes—unpredictable military behaviour or more assertive unilateral action—require careful diplomatic and defence planning.

Neighbourhood States

China has been intensively engaged with economic and infrastructure build-up in India's immediate neighbourhood, especially under its Belt and Road (BRI) projects. Instability within China's military leadership could reduce Beijing's aggressiveness to push high-visibility projects; shift China's regional engagement focus more toward consolidating internal affairs rather than projecting power outward, which might give India the opportunity to reverse the balance of ties with its other neighbours like Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Indian Ocean and Strategic Partnerships

China's enhanced role in the Indian Ocean, including naval cooperation with countries like Pakistan and engagement with Sri Lanka and the Maldives comprises a strategic challenge for India. A distracted or internally preoccupied Chinese military might reduce

14. Srikanth Kondapalli, "When Purges Create a Power Vacuum", *Deccan Herald*, February 1, 2026, https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/when-purges-create-a-power-vacuum-3881679#google_vignette. Accessed on February 15, 2026.

the pace of aggressive maritime assertions. Either scenario affects India's neighbourhood diplomacy, particularly in the economic, security, and infrastructure arenas.

Border Management with China

After the recent efforts at disengagement, maintaining stability along the India-China border remains a core concern. While a purge doesn't directly change ground deployments, it could affect the PLA's leadership continuity, complicating negotiations on de-escalation and make Chinese commanders more cautious in border incidents, as it might reflect on their personal promotions and bring unnecessary attention from the Party. The purge emphasises Xi's prioritisation of Party loyalty over professional military autonomy—a dynamic that India and other neighbours need to factor into their respective China policies.

Above all, it has ramifications on the India-China border dispute. The anti-corruption drive highlights deep structural problems within the PLA, leading to lower predictability factors in new age warfare. Yet there are elements of resilience that will continue to bolster military modernisation. Strong institutional systems, funding, and industrial support ensure continuity. India can face two scenarios that it should prepare for:

- Heightened aggressiveness or unpredictability along the LAC.
- Lack of momentum demonstrating continuity in practice.

In the first case scenario, India should brace for disruption in the chain of command that may lead to either excessive risk aversion or aggressive posturing by theatre level officers. After purges, newly promoted officers sometimes seek to prove loyalty and competence; this may lead to more aggressive patrolling. There may be a possibility of tactical actions designed to show resolve without triggering full conflict.

In the second case scenario, due to more centralised and politically controlled military decision-making, border actions are likely to see no immediate reactions, as they are increasingly based on strategic signalling and less on incidental changes in the PLA. Newly appointed commanders may take time to consolidate control

and understand local operations conditions. This could even lead temporarily to reduction of operational coherence in regions like Ladakh or Arunachal Pradesh. Miscalculation risks may arise during patrol standoffs which may force them into inaction. Another factor is morale. Such purges can instil fear and encourage risk-averse behaviour among surviving senior officers, which may impede operational thinking and responsiveness in crisis scenarios. Also, due to the Taiwanese angle, China would be reluctant to open a second front.

China's history illustrates a pattern of military action during periods of internal instability; however, currently, China is witnessing stable growth and Chinese economists believe that the slow-down in the economy is still normal given that this pace of growth is expected to slow down. China announced a military budget of 7 per cent increase in the 'Two Sessions' meeting held in early March 2026, which, though lower than other years, reflects that military modernisation is the top priority. India should be more concerned about the introduction of new elements and technology like quantum computing, brain-computer interfaces, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), each of which is a key aspect of the PLA's current modernisation efforts.¹⁵ China's new defence budget follows the PLA's efforts to complete its initial modernisation efforts by the end of the year, which will coincide with the force's 100-year anniversary. While there are some efforts going on to resolve the middle-sector border conflict, India should be wary of Chinese military modernisation, simply given its alacrity to open up a surprise at the least opportune moment for India.

CONCLUSION

The current purges are commemorative of Mao's fundamental quest to keep the Party and the army free from degeneration. In 1945, Mao Zedong had suggested three methods—permanent revolution, ideological rectification and self-transformation through struggle—to avoid degeneration. This seems to have trickled down to Xi Jinping and others. Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaigns have many of

15. Jack Burnham, "China's Defense Budget Keeps Growing While Economy Contracts," FDD, March 5, 2026, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2026/03/05/chinas-defense-budget-keeps-growing-while-economy-contracts/>. Accessed on February 20, 2026.

the elements derived from his predecessors or rather their belief in 'learning from the history' of their nation. He has been persistently keeping a watch on the senior generals and all the 'tigers and flies' in his effort to maintain regime stability and discard factionalism.¹⁶

Many experts have come to see the current purges as part of the 'Red over Experts' dynamic and are debating the consequences of Xi Jinping's actions. This is some progress in terms of how the debate has shifted from the 'bread and butter over guns' debate which is not relevant as most rising powers are investing heavily in their defence forces. However, what is perceptible is that under Xi Jinping, the focus is more on leadership and loyalty, than combat-readiness and experience of war. The officers' personal loyalty to Xi for advancement of their careers is likely to outweigh organisational norms and professional competence. One must not get swayed away by the bureaucratic upheaval—rather, study the emerging patterns of recruitment and personnel management strategies under the new generation leadership that is taking over the reins.

Regarding India, as China aims to indulge in a long-term process of de-escalation and de-induction of troops, their assessment of each other's military capabilities needs to be based of careful recalibration of actual material strength rather than temporary instances of rejigs in the leadership. Some scholars have looked at these instances in almost Shakespearean terms and compared the ousters with no less than a Shakespearean tragedy unfolding in the highest echelons of China's military architecture, yet the brutal truth comprises the ascendance of 'power politics' over performance management. With Jiang Bin, spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defence, reiterating that the ouster of the top generals represents a major achievement in the CPC's anti-corruption campaign within the military and maintaining that Taiwan's re-unification remains the top priority of the government,¹⁷ the policy choices of the Chinese political leadership are set clear, and the military leadership has no option but to fall in line with the will of its political masters.

16. Kumar, n. 11.

17. Li Shangyi, "War on Corruption to Strengthen PLA", *China Daily*, January 30, 2026, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202601/30/WS697c00cea310d6866eb36894.html>. Accessed on February 20, 2026.