

Xi's purges could mean more instability along the border



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LAST MONTH'S announcement that China's two most senior generals — Zhang Youxia, vice chair of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and Liu Zhenli, chief of the Joint Staff Department — were under investigation is among the most dramatic politico-military ruptures in the country in decades. A blistering editorial in the PLA daily accuses the two of "seriously undermining the Chairman Responsibility System" and "gravely betraying the trust placed in them by the Party Central Committee"

Zhang was China's senior-most uniformed officer, and Liu was responsible for operational planning, joint command and war-fighting readiness. Their removal leaves the CMC — the apex of China's military command — with two members: Xi Jinping and Zhang Shengmin, the military's chief disciplinarian. The PLA has not been this hollowed out at the top since the Cultural Revolution. This is the culmination of a campaign that has removed two defence ministers, the leadership of the Rocket Force, senior commanders and dozens of generals.

Three broad observations can help understand this moment's significance.

First, Xi's trust in the PLA's senior leadership has eroded. Zhang was once widely believed to be Xi's closest military ally. The purge of men he once appointed damages Xi's credibility but also underscores his power. The Party has sought to address concerns about the persistence of corruption cases despite Xi's prolonged anti-corruption campaign by arguing, "the deeper one digs, the more is uncovered". However, the purges are telling evidence of the scale of the problems China faces in trying to transform the PLA into a modern fighting force.

Two, the purge does not mean the PLA's modernisation has been seriously undermined. It's a resilient enterprise involving thousands of officers, multiple industrial/technology ecosystems, and massive funding. Disruption at the apex can create uncertainty in planning, delays in approvals, and hesitation among officers who fear becoming the next target. But China's military upgradation will not slow down.

Three, the PLA's theatre commands, service headquarters, and operational units continue to function. The absence of experi-

enced figures at the top, however, increases the risk of miscommunication, over-correction, and political over-sensitivity.

There is a temptation to assume a purged PLA will be less assertive. In the short term, Xi may not risk a major military operation. But China's history also speaks of military action during periods of intense internal instability — entry into the Korean War in the early 1950s, the attack on India in 1962, a clash with the USSR in 1969 and teaching Vietnam "a lesson" in 1979.

In the short term, the purge reduces the likelihood of a major kinetic action against Taiwan. But beyond the immediate, a PLA staffed with younger, ideologically vetted officers may feel compelled to show its reliability. The shift in US posture under Donald Trump, including Taiwan's absence in the National Defence Strategy, may embolden Beijing. Action need not involve a risky invasion. China has developed options including blockade, disruption of undersea cables, or targeting Taiwan's outlying islands.

India should not expect any easing along the LAC. China's behaviour on the border is driven by structural factors: Territorial claims, strategic geography, and Beijing's desire to keep Delhi off balance. These do not change because of the PLA's instability. As the Party expects officers to show loyalty through action, a politically insecure PLA may double down on forward deployments.

India must prepare for an increase in unpredictability. With the chain of command disrupted, theatre-level officers may become either excessively risk-averse or excessively aggressive. The history of the border shows local misjudgements can escalate quickly.

The purge signals a change in personnel rather than in China's strategic ambitions. The Party's message is clear: The next generation of PLA leaders will be "new-era officers nurtured by Xi Jinping Thought". It reveals a military that is more politicised, more anxious, and more dependent on Xi. But it does not mark a turning point in China's external behaviour. For India, the message is clear. The PLA may be undergoing a political earthquake, but earthquakes do not make mountains disappear. They only make the terrain more unstable.

The writer is former ambassador to China