

Making sense of Zhang Youxia's downfall – an expert roundup

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Summary

- This brief collates a broad range of expert assessments, and distils and quantifies recurring insights to shed light on the purge of the senior Chinese military leader, Zhang Youxia.
- Most analysts see Zhang's removal chiefly as a power struggle, as Xi Jinping sidelined a figure who was seen as too influential. Corruption and policy disagreements over Taiwan are cited as alternative or complementary explanations.
- Many analyses highlight the impact on China's Taiwan policy. While the purge may have reduced the likelihood of an attack in the short term, it could increase the medium-term risk by empowering more compliant commanders. A minority of analysts argue that it will have only a limited operational impact.
- Analysts are divided regarding what the purge means for Xi's political power: some see it as strengthening his control by removing a rare potential rival; others argue it exposes insecurity and risks increasing mistrust and governance problems.

On 24 January, the Chinese government [announced](#) that top-ranking military leaders Zhang Youxia (张又侠) and Liu Zhenli (刘振立) were under investigation for violating laws and breaching discipline. A few days later, the [People's Liberation Army \(PLA\)](#) clarified that charges involved undermining the so-called chairman responsibility system of the Central Military Commission (CMC) or, in other words, challenging Chairman Xi Jinping's (习近平) and the Communist Party's command and control of the military. Zhang and Liu were further accused of having nurtured corruption, with severe consequences for the party, the PLA and the Chinese state.

The removal followed three years of [successive purges](#) in the upper echelons of the PLA. The investigation of Zhang is particularly notable, however, given his rank and stature. He was one of only three officials above the customary retirement age of 68 who were selected for the current Central Committee in 2022 – a reflection of the trust he previously enjoyed. The purge represents a familiar situation for China watchers. We know that the development is important, but limited information prevents us from saying with reasonable confidence exactly how.

This paper instead collates a broad range of assessments from press and blog articles, podcasts and television discussions, by distilling, grouping and quantifying recurring expert insights. The assessment is organised as answers to three questions: What explains the purge of Zhang? How might it affect possible military action against Taiwan? What does it reveal about Xi's power and position in China?

We identified the analyses using web searches and snowballing. Once we began to see diminishing returns in terms of new arguments, we stopped at 42 items. We believe that this set captures most of the common arguments available in the open domain. We use graphics to illustrate the frequency of different arguments. If a single expert advanced a similar argument across multiple platforms, it is counted only once. Most of the analyses are in English or Chinese, but we have also included some French, Russian and Swedish analyses.

What explains the purge?

The little reliable evidence available makes explaining the purge a challenge. The dominant interpretation frames Zhang's removal as a power struggle but corruption and differing views on Taiwan policy are also mentioned as possible contributing factors.



■ Power struggle (29) ■ Corruption (10) ■ Disagreement over policy (7)

Power struggle

A first interpretation sees the purge as driven by a struggle for power. Analysts argue that Xi viewed Zhang as a “[disproportionately powerful figure](#)” with “[deep networks](#)” who considered himself to be Xi’s “[equal](#)”, capable of becoming a “[potential threat](#)” or counterweight. Some describe the move as a “[pre-emptive strike](#)” to ensure Xi’s “[absolute authority](#)” and deter future challengers. According to this view, Zhang’s accumulated influence, factional ties and perceived insufficient obedience compelled Xi to oust him from power.

Corruption

The [official explanation](#) identified corruption as one reason. Some analysts believe this to be accurate, but tend to emphasise that the key issue was not corruption in itself, but its corrosive effect on military effectiveness. Zhang is described as having “[prioritized profit](#)” over readiness, while Xi had grown frustrated with commanders’ “[penchant for putting cash in their pockets](#)” instead of strengthening the force. Zhang’s removal thus reflects Xi’s impatience with practices that have weakened warfighting performance.

Disagreement over policy

Another explanation stresses a strategic rift over Taiwan. Xi is said to have pushed for rapid preparations for a possible operation “[by 2027](#)”, while Zhang and others favoured a slower, capability-first approach and viewed timelines “[closer to 2035](#)” as more realistic. Some commanders were described as “[showing more caution](#)” and being increasingly blunt about readiness gaps. Analysts believe that Xi saw this caution as obstructing his drive for faster modernisation, prompting him to remove leaders who resisted his pace and priorities.

How does the purge affect the possibility of military action against Taiwan?

As the first of two vice-chairmen on the CMC, Zhang was the highest-ranking officer in the Chinese military, since its chairman, Xi, is a civilian. It is therefore not surprising that many analyses of Zhang’s downfall address its potential effects vis-à-vis Taiwan, China’s most important security concern. Arguments regarding the effects of the purge on a possible military attack on Taiwan can be clustered into three main groups.



- Reduced likelihood of an attack in the short term (22)
- Increased likelihood of an attack in the medium to long term (11)
- Limited operational impact (3)

Reduced likelihood of an attack in the short term

Many analysts believe that Zhang’s purge reduces the likelihood of an imminent attack on Taiwan. They stress that the removal of top-ranking commanders creates a “[gap in experience](#)” at the CMC and its “[Joint Operations Command Centre](#)” with “[real-time operational impact](#)”. It is estimated that it will take Xi at least five years “[to rebuild these chains of command](#)” and that an attack therefore is unlikely, given the difficulty of wartime command and control without an “[experienced leadership that trusts one another](#)”.

Increased likelihood of an attack in the medium to long term

Over time, by contrast, analysts see an increasing risk for Taiwan. Xi's removal of veteran generals opens up space for a generation of less experienced military leaders who "[will execute his orders with aggressive zeal](#)". They may also become more proactive to "[demonstrate their abilities and loyalty](#)". Military training and exercises "[may become more aggressive and more frequent](#)". Moreover, if corruption really was behind the purges and the PLA manages to eliminate it, it could over time become a "[more proficient fighting force](#)".

Limited operational impact

A few analyses argue that Zhang's purge will only have limited operational consequences for a Taiwan scenario. The PLA's centennial military modernisation goals for 2027 are often interpreted by western observers as reaching preparedness for a Taiwan contingency. Although the probability of achieving this capability by the deadline "[remains extremely low](#)", this assessment is not dependent on whether Zhang is in office. While the turmoil at the apex of military power suggests that the PLA is not ready for war, these accounts argue that there is little to suggest that "[the PLA's combat readiness has been severely disrupted](#)" by recent events.

What are the implications of the purge for Xi Jinping's political power?

The question of Xi's political power within the Chinese system – already prominent in analyses following the recurrent military and civilian purges since 2023 and in anticipation of the upcoming 21st Party Congress – has been underscored by the exceptional nature of Zhang's purge. Analysts are now debating whether Xi's decision reflects a position of strength or reveals underlying weakness or vulnerability.



■ Strength (20) ■ Weakness (20)

Strength

A first set of scenarios stresses the positive implications for Xi's leadership. First, this "[open break](#)" with traditional forces within the military is taken as a sign that Xi is "[very comfortable in his position](#)". By this "[proactive](#)" move, he has managed to eliminate "[the most likely other center of power apart from the CCP](#)" and sent a message to high-ranking officials, particularly "princelings", that "[ties to Mr Xi are no guarantee of protection](#)". By eliminating one of the few military figures of "[significant seniority and symbolic significance](#)", if not "[the only individual possessing the capability to genuinely challenge \[his\] military authority](#)", Xi may have succeeded where his recent predecessors have failed by "[truly taking back control over](#)

[the army](#)". Tactically, Zhang's purge may have increased Xi's personal control, and thus party control over the armed forces, thereby ensuring that the processes of political succession "[remain firmly in Xi's hands](#)".

Weakness

Other analysts believe that Xi acted from a sense of insecurity vis-à-vis the "[trustworthiness](#)" of the top command. For example, some believe Zhang had seen an "[opening for \[his\] attempted consolidation of influence](#)". However, the hypothesis of a Zhang-led "[coup](#)" or "[mutiny](#)" gets limited support. The purge may simply have been the result of a pervasive "[paranoid streak](#)", illustrative of a broader "[dictator dilemma](#)" that breeds further power centralisation. Analysts underline that Xi's "[anti-corruption crusade](#)", while enhancing his "[feelings of security](#)", is likely to have sparked friction and an overall "[bad look for Xi](#)" among PLA leaders in particular. While the purge might have instilled a "[new party-army dynamic that puts him in control](#)", Xi could become more "[isolated](#)" as his apparently ineffective anti-corruption campaign meets with resentment. Several analyses concur that "[governance and operational risks](#)" linked to misjudgement and miscalculation risks are likely given the probable appointment of successors selected on "[loyalty before competence](#)" who are "[willing to execute his military blueprint](#)".

Looking ahead

Coming developments may shed light on whether the investigation of Zhang marks the culmination of the mass military purges in recent years, or if leadership turbulence will become a permanent feature of Chinese military politics. In the short term, the size of the military delegation, and any unexpected absences, at the upcoming National People's Congress (NPC) session in early March may offer indications about current and future investigations. Chinese authorities recently announced the removal of nine additional generals from the list of NPC delegates. If, when and with whom Xi chooses to fill the vacancies of the decimated CMC will also signal which power centres he currently trusts and which service branches are being prioritised.

As a central pillar of communist politics, developments within the PLA can have consequences far beyond the military. Authoritarian systems lack checks and balances and are often considered inherently unstable, especially during leadership transitions. The relative stability of Chinese politics during recent decades has often been attributed to the institutionalisation of rules and regulations that makes the system predictable, such as mandatory retirement ages for political and military cadres, presidential term limits, collective leadership, and gradual leadership promotions. Under Xi, these principles have all been broken, undermining the system's foundations. As a result, instability and continued power struggles can be expected.



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