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'XI JINPING, DISMISSAL OF THE SENIOR MOST GENERALS AND THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY'

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Chinese President Xi Jinping took a decisive step on January 24, by announcing that the Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) General Zhang Youxia and the Chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department General Liu Zhenli had been placed under investigation. In one stroke Xi Jinping demonstrated that he has a firm grip on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and will not hesitate to crush even a suggestion of opposition. The move also comes just under a year before the 21st Party Congress when Xi Jinping is expected to secure approval for a fourth term as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC), Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and President of China.

2. It would be facetious to compare General Zhang Youxia's removal with that of the other Generals dismissed by Xi Jinping barely three months earlier. General Zhang Youxia was, till his removal, the senior most military officer in the PLA, was well regarded by the PLA, and one of the few at that level with battle experience. More importantly, he is a "military princeling", has a second generation friendship with Xi Jinping and was reappointed by Xi Jinping to the Central Military Commission (CMC) as Vice Chairman though he was 72 years old ignoring the age eligibility criteria. Equally, if not more, significant is that with Zhang Youxia's removal within three months of the expulsion of the other CMC Vice Chairman General He Weidong -- both Vice Chairmen of the CMC were concurrently members of the Politburo -- the PLA has been denied any representation in the CCP Politburo. Xi Jinping has not elevated anyone to replace them in the Politburo. The PLA's representation in the CCP's 20th Central Committee too has been reduced to less than half the strength it had, thereby reducing the PLA's political influence and denting its prestige.

3. Serious charges of corruption were levelled against He Weidong and the seven other Generals, including former CMC Political Commissar Miao Hua, following which they were expelled from the Army and CCP in October 2025. Both He Weidong and Miao Hua were handpicked by Xi Jinping. He Weidong, in fact, was a decades-long friend and drinking buddy of Xi Jinping, who brought him to Beijing when he took over as Vice Chairman of the CMC and later "helicoptered" him into the CMC as Vice Chairman and even appointed him member of the CCP Politburo though he had not even been a member of the CCP CC. Miao Hua too enjoyed a high degree of trust as evidenced by his being reappointed for a second term as Member of the CMC when he was on the cusp of retirement at 67 years old. The language of the public notification listing the charges against He Weidong and the others reflected a sense of personal hurt and was unusually stern and tough. The charges against Zhang Youxia that are being investigated, however, are more serious and the announcement by the Ministry of National

Defence states that he and Liu Zhenli “have been investigated for suspected serious discipline and law violations”.

4. The day following the official announcement, on January 25, a PLA Daily Editorial clarified the charges brought against Zhang Youxia and the former Chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department General Liu Zhenli. Underlining the gravity of the decision it urged that “All officers and soldiers of the armed forces must resolutely support the decision of the Party Central Committee, consciously maintain a high degree of consistency with the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core in thought, politics, and action, resolutely obey the command of the Party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Xi, and ensure the high degree of unity, purity, and consolidation of the armed forces”. The editorial, which pronouncedly focussed on the political and not financial corruption, disclosed that Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli, “as senior cadres of the Party and the military, seriously betrayed the trust and expectations of the Party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission, severely trampled on and undermined the Chairman of the Central Military Commission's responsibility system, seriously fostered political and corruption problems that undermined the Party's absolute leadership over the military and threatened the Party's ruling foundation, seriously damaged the image and prestige of the Central Military Commission, and severely impacted the political and ideological foundation for unity and progress among all officers and soldiers”. It added “They caused immense damage to the military's political building, political ecology, and combat effectiveness, and had an extremely negative impact on the Party, the country, and the military”. Indicating that more personnel would be purged, it promised that the investigation and ensuing punishment would “rectify the political situation, eliminate ideological poison and malpractices, and revitalize the organization”.

5. The accusation that the two had “severely trampled on and undermined the Chairman of the Central Military Commission's responsibility system, seriously fostered political and corruption problems that undermined the Party's absolute leadership over the military and threatened the Party's ruling foundation, seriously damaged the image and prestige of the Central Military Commission” suggests that Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli had actually challenged Xi Jinping's authority and chosen to ignore his directives. The term “political and corruption problems” points to them challenging Xi Jinping's position. The assertion that they “undermined the Party's absolute leadership over the military and threatened the Party's ruling foundation” is particularly serious, especially at this time when the CCP is gearing up for its next Congress and none of the aspirants -- if any -- for Party leadership appear to have any military background. It would be aimed at rallying the Party around Xi Jinping.

6. It is difficult to accept that Zhang Youxia, who in addition to being so close to Xi Jinping is equally steeped in communist ideology and would also have a sense of military history, would challenge Xi Jinping's authority or position. Moreover he has nothing to gain. It is more likely that Zhang Youxia privately advised Xi Jinping against another term in office in view of the extant resentment. In the backdrop of Xi Jinping having placed even Politburo members under surveillance and restricted their authority since April 2020, and dismissing He Weidong and eight other Generals for building factions, it is probable a paranoid Xi Jinping interpreted Zhang Youxia's advice as opposition.

7. In fact, after the Fourth CC Plenum approved the dismissal of He Weidong and the other Generals from the Army and CCP, Zhang Youxia published a lengthy article in the PLA Daily (November 12) implicitly criticising factionalism. In addition to including 25 mentions of Xi Jinping, Zhang Youxia emphasised “We must consolidate the political advantage of the Party's absolute leadership over the People's Army” and “resolutely prevent being a “two-faced person” or engaging in false loyalty, and truly root the maintenance of the core leadership and obedience to the Party's command in the minds of officers and soldiers”. In the article he also outlined the plan for modernisation and reform of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

8. Following these developments there appeared to be an effort by Xi Jinping and the CMC to publicise Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli's ‘crimes’ and quell any doubts or feeling of unease among the officers and soldiers of the PLA. The PLA Daily published at least five articles on successive days detailing the charges, including laxity in combat effectiveness, against Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli and cautioned PLA personnel that the PLA must “absolutely” obey the CCP and Xi Jinping. Indicating the seriousness of their case and the start of a campaign against them, each article named Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli and accused them of undermining the Party's absolute leadership over the Army as also Xi Jinping's position. One article even emphasised the need to “resolutely obey Chairman Xi's command, take responsibility to him, and reassure him”.

9. One PLA Daily (February 2) article warned PLA personnel to “unify their thinking and actions with the major decisions and deployments of the Party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Xi”. Another Commentator's article in PLA Daily (February 1) asserted that “Political rectification is an important instrument through which the people's armed forces strengthen themselves politically, and a powerful tool for comprehensively reinforcing the Party's leadership over the military and Party building within the armed forces. The serious investigation and punishment of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli demonstrate the Party's firm stance in resolutely safeguarding the political character of the people's armed forces”. It added “This has eliminated major political risks that undermined the Party's absolute leadership over the military and threatened the Party's governing foundation, achieving historic accomplishments in political military-building in the new era”. However, it warned “Factors that weaken the Party's absolute leadership and erode the military's political character still exist, and the task of eliminating the soil and conditions that breed corruption remains arduous”. An earlier more toughly worded Commentary in PLA Daily (January 31) stated “All officers and soldiers must firmly support the Party Central Committee's decision, maintain a high degree of unity in thought, politics, and action with the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core”. Warning especially “leading” cadres, it said the cases of “Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli once again demonstrates the clear stance of no forbidden zones, full coverage, and zero tolerance in anti-corruption, represents a determined struggle to eliminate major political risks”. It stressed that cadres “must deeply grasp the decisive significance of the “two establishments,” strengthen the “four consciousnesses,” firm up the “four confidences,” and achieve the “two safeguards,” implement the responsibility system of the CMC chairman, resolutely obey Chairman Xi's command, take responsibility to him, and reassure him”. The articles were published only in the PLA Daily. They suggest that the campaign against Zhang Youxia, Liu Zhenli and the other Generals and to weed out their associates and supporters will continue.

10. In an apparent shift in tone the People's Daily (February 6) published an article captioned "Always keep the well-being of officers and soldiers in mind" —President Xi Jinping's deep concern". The article focussed on Xi Jinping's concern for the ordinary soldier and highlighted that he has visited high mountains, the desert and deep seas to check on their living conditions and welfare.

11. In contrast to the quick announcement of replacements for He Weidong and the other seven Generals, Xi Jinping has not yet replaced Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli. He has also opted not to appoint anyone in place of Zhang Youxia and He Weidong to the Politburo, or replace the over twenty other PLA officers removed from the CCP CC. The changes have wider implications. This could either mean reduced influence of the PLA in national affairs, or that Xi Jinping will appoint officers to the CCP CC and Politburo after more intense vetting which is certainly underway. If the former, it will undoubtedly dent the PLA's image and prestige.

12. The reduced strength of the CMC and removal of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli could suggest a leaner command structure with more rapid decision-making powers. Xi Jinping as *mishu* (private secretary) to Defence Minister Geng Biao has had a ringside seat to the conduct of military affairs and witnessed the PLA's performance during the 1979 war with Vietnam. Since he took over in October 2012, as Chairman CMC and General Secretary of the CCP CC he has taken active interest in military affairs, including implementing the most extensive ever reform of the PLA. Between 2012 and 2025 he incrementally instituted a Chairman Responsibility System in the PLA. This system enhances his oversight of the PLA and allows him to transmit orders directly to commanders and monitor their implementation. This redundancy would ensure against individual commanders becoming irreplaceable. The promotion of younger officers could additionally imply more assertive and decisive commanders.

13. Further, following Xi Jinping's imposition of the comprehensive ban on rare earth exports and consequent immediate capitulation of the US and West, and following his conversation with US President Trump in Busan in October 2025 and again more recently, Xi Jinping would have been assured that any immediate threat from the US has receded. Charging Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli, both battle experienced commanders, with laxity in combat effectiveness indicates that Xi Jinping will accelerate the PLA's modernisation plans and preparedness for military operations. Xi Jinping has already made clear his ambition to "recover" China's territories "lost through the imposition of unequal treaties by hostile foreign powers" and China has, at virtually every level of contact with the US and other countries, made explicit that Taiwan is a "core" issue. Tensions with Taiwan will probably rise after Xi Jinping commences his fourth term in office in 2027 if not earlier. There is also high possibility that Xi Jinping will try and settle other outstanding territorial disputes with China's neighbours by threatening the use of military force. Such a scenario will see renewed heightened tensions with India, Japan and the Philippines, but this time with a defined time horizon.

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