

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

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Xi Jinping's High-Level Military Purges and Their Political and Military Implications

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On January 24, 2026, China's Ministry of National Defense announced that Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and Liu Zhenli, a member of the CMC, were under investigation for "serious violations of discipline and law." Although they are currently under investigation, past Chinese military purge patterns suggest that senior figures under investigation are subsequently suspended from duty or dismissed. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that Zhang and Liu have been effectively purged.

Assessment of High-Level Military Purges in Xi Jinping's Third Term

1. Xi Jinping's "Strong Military Dream" and Military Corruption

Since taking power, Xi Jinping has championed the "Strong Military Dream (強軍夢)" to achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and safeguard China's core interests. He has pushed hard for military modernization, including instructing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to be ready to take Taiwan by 2027. In this process, corruption issues within the military have surfaced. In July 2023, the Equipment Development Department of the CMC announced it would accept reports of misconduct related to military equipment procurement and bidding since October 2017, when Xi Jinping's second term began. This indicates the Chinese government is taking a serious approach to military corruption issues that have arisen during Xi's rule.

2. Expanding Control Over the Military Amid Distrust

As purges of high-ranking military officials continued during Xi's third term, some media outlets raised suspicions about a power struggle between Xi and military factions. While the

exact reasons remain unclear due to the closed nature of Chinese politics and the military, Xi Jinping's governance style and the purge process within the CMC since the start of his third term suggest that distrust of the military and an effort to directly push reform has likely played a major role, rather than a power struggle between Xi and factions within the CMC alone.

Despite forming the CMC with his close allies at the start of his third term, Xi Jinping has alternately purged factions within the military since 2023 as corruption issues came to light, thereby weakening these factions. From Xi's perspective, having invested massive budgets in military modernization, corruption within the military would have inevitably led to doubts and distrust regarding the military's operational capabilities and combat effectiveness. In other words, these purges of high-ranking military officials are not about a power struggle between Xi and military factions or about Xi's ability to control over the military, but rather the result of Xi's distrust of the military and his patience reaching its limit.

Political Implications of the High-Level Military Purges: Demonstrating Xi Jinping's Solid Political Power

Through the purge of senior military officials, Xi Jinping has reinforced his absolute authority and status over the military. At the same time, by ruthlessly purging even his own close allies, he has highlighted his resolve to root out military corruption and realize the goal of building a strong military. Mao Zedong famously declared, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Considering how Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin maintained political influence by retaining the CMC chairman, Xi Jinping's control over the CMC and the military can also be interpreted as a political move to secure his fourth term and maintain political influence beyond. Xi Jinping will continue to strengthen his control over the military to ensure he does not end his political life with a fourth term, but rather maintains political influence beyond it. This could ultimately amplify the risks inherent in a one-man-rule system.

Military Implications of the High-Level Military Purges: Accelerating the "Strong Military Dream" and Expanding Regional Instability

Xi Jinping's purge of senior military officials has created a leadership vacuum within the Chinese military command. In the short term, this will heighten instability within the command structure and lead to unease and low morale among military units. Consequently, until a new command lineup is in place, the PLA is expected to focus on routine training and gray zone tactics rather than pursuing new operations or military strategies. Regarding the Taiwan issue, the current situation makes unified joint operations difficult. Therefore, the likelihood of China launching a full-scale invasion of Taiwan around 2027 appears low.

However, in the medium to long term, Xi Jinping's personal political will is likely to be directly projected onto the PLA's personnel and organizational restructuring, combat capabilities, and military policies, accelerating China's military modernization. In this

process, as the command structure is built around personnel loyal to Xi Jinping, his personal political decisions are expected to directly influence the design and execution of China's military operations. This raises the risk that sudden military operations by China, such as an invasion of Taiwan, could become more plausible. Moreover, as loyalty-based personnel reorganization deepens, the risk of distorted information reaching policy decision-makers increases. Consequently, this could raise the likelihood of Xi Jinping's miscalculation and increase the unpredictability of China's military, destabilizing the regional security environment.

Implications for South Korea

First, South Korea should recognize the potential for military conflict arising from the increased frequency and intensity of Chinese military exercises in the surrounding maritime and airspace and establish countermeasures. As Xi Jinping consolidates control over the military and actively pursues military modernization, the frequency and intensity of Chinese military exercises in South Korea's surrounding maritime and airspace will likely increase further. Field commanders may also conduct more aggressive training near South Korea as part of a competition for loyalty, in response to ROK-U.S. combined exercises and ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation. The South Korean government and military must strengthen the situation-sharing system between the military and the Coast Guard, considering the possibility that expanded Chinese military training or gray-zone tactics may occur not only in the Taiwan Strait but also in the West Sea and the KADIZ. They should also refine rules of engagement and field manuals by breaking down accidental-clash scenarios into more detailed contingencies.

Second, to counter China's military threats, South Korea needs to intensify monitoring of the PLA and strengthen ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation. Beyond changes in Chinese military capabilities, monitoring and analysis of operational patterns—including leadership reshuffles, shifts in theater-specific training patterns, linked exercises in the Taiwan Strait-East China Sea-West Sea, and political propaganda targeting the military—are essential to discern the intentions of China's leadership and assess the level of risk posed by the PLA. Given the scope of Chinese military exercises in the West Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait, South Korea should share information on personnel, training, and capability changes within the PLA in the ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation process. It is also necessary to establish joint mechanisms to assess warning indicators and coordinate crisis management. Even if the role and mission scope of the ROK-U.S. alliance expands in this process, South Korea should emphasize that Korea's primary priorities remain resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and ensuring stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the surrounding region to prevent misunderstandings that South Korea is fully participating in a strategy of containing China.

About the Author

Dr. LEE Dong-gyu is a senior research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Lee received his B.A. and M.A. from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, and Ph.D. in politics from Tsinghua University in China. His research focuses on Chinese politics and foreign policy, South Korea-China relations, and Northeast Asia security. His recent publications include “The Belt and Road Initiative after COVID-19: Implications of Expanding Health and Digital Silkroads,” “Is Political Reform of the Chinese Communist Party Going Back: Changes and Durability of Intra-democracy in the Xi Jinping Era,” “Xi Jinping Thought from the Perspective of the Chinese Communist Party’s Ideological Strategy,” “Development Factors and Specificity of Korea-China Relations in the Cold War Era: 1972-1992,” “A Study on the Sinicization of Marxism after Reform and Opening Up,” etc.

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