Loyalty, Purges and Fragility: Stress Within Chinese People's Liberation Army

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"Our principle is that the Party commands the gun and we will never allow the gun to command the Party"

—Mao Zedong[1]

(*Problems of War and Strategy*, 1938)

Abstract

China's ongoing military purges under President Xi Jinping have significantly altered the People's Liberation Army (PLA). These purges have prioritised political loyalty above all else, even at the expense of institutional stability and professional expertise. This article uses systems thinking to illustrate how these repeated purges, while ensuring short-term political control, gradually undermine command continuity, trust, and overall operational effectiveness. Although the PLA still possesses considerable military strength, the instability within its highest leadership ranks has created temporary strategic weaknesses. The study suggests that India could leverage this brief period by enhancing its border infrastructure, intelligence capabilities, operational readiness, and diplomatic efforts. The opening is not

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol CLVI, No. 645, July-September 2026.

confined to the land frontier; it extends equally to the Indian Ocean Region, where India's positional advantage is greatest, as it constrains the PLA Navy and Air Force in sustaining distant deployments.

Introduction

China today presents a clear paradox. It asserts itself as the world's most advanced military, from cutting-edge space warfare systems to the largest naval fleet, yet appears increasingly short of senior commanders. The Fourth Plenary Session of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 20th Central Committee, which concluded in Oct 2025, saw strikingly low attendance among Central Committee members, with about one-sixth absent. Thereafter, in Jan 2026, General Zhang Youxia, a long-time confidant of President Xi Jinping and one of the two remaining Vice Chairmen of China's Central Military Commission (CMC), was placed under investigation, along with members of his family.[2] This left the seven-member apex military decision-making body with only two members: President Xi, the CMC Chairman, and General Zhang Shengmin, the other CMC Vice Chairman, who had been appointed in Oct 2025. By mid-2026, an estimated 101 senior officers holding appointments at the CMC, theatre commander or theatre deputy commander level had been removed, affecting roughly half of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) senior leadership positions.[3].

The pattern held through 2026. The March National People's Congress (NPC) met with unusually thin military representation, and on 26 Jun 26, the NPC Standing Committee stripped thirteen lawmakers of their posts, six of them senior PLA officers, confirming that the purge now cuts across the civil-military divide[4]. A week later, on 03 Jul 26, President Xi promoted two officers to full General: General Zhang Shuguang as Secretary of the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, replacing General Zhang Shengmin, who had held it since 2017, and General Wang Gang, the serving Commander of the PLA Air Force. Neither was inducted into the CMC, which remains a two-member body[5].-The purge has therefore entered a concurrent purge-and-rebuild phase. Hence, the question logically emerges: 'Who will lead the PLA in the event of a conflict?'

This dilemma underscores the predicament prevalent in the PLA at a time when internal restlessness seems to be simmering just beneath the surface.

This is not unprecedented in communist civil-military practice. Stalin's Red Army purge of 1937–38 repressed over half of 1,844 general-rank officers and executed at least 780, an episode historians treat as a primary reason for the Soviet Army's failed response to Hitler's invasion in Jun 1941.[6] Mao's purge following Lin Biao's flight in Sep 1971 removed the leadership of the General Staff, the Air Force and the Navy, and embedded a purge culture that has never left the PLA. In both cases, the political gain was immediate and the military cost deferred.

This article contends that the current turbulence within the PLA should not be interpreted as a loss of control by President Xi. Instead, it is a deliberate exchange in which political loyalty is prioritised over institutional depth and professional aptitude, a trend running since 2013 that now manifests as growing stress on the PLA's military efficacy. It examines what the promotion-purge cycle reveals about Chinese civil-military relations, then sets out indicators and policy responses for India.

The Institutional Framework

The architecture depicted in Figure 1 is not incidental to the purges; it is what makes purges possible in its current, noiseless form. President Xi concurrently holds the three principal offices of the Chinese system: General Secretary of the Party, President of the state, and Chairman of the CMC. Each controls its own disciplinary organ, so a general can be investigated, stripped of his deputy status, and expelled with no independent body able to obstruct the process. President Xi has systematically dismantled the distinctions between the Party and the state, prioritised personal ideology over established institutional norms, and secured indefinite tenure through the Mar 2018 constitutional amendment that removed presidential term limits.[7]

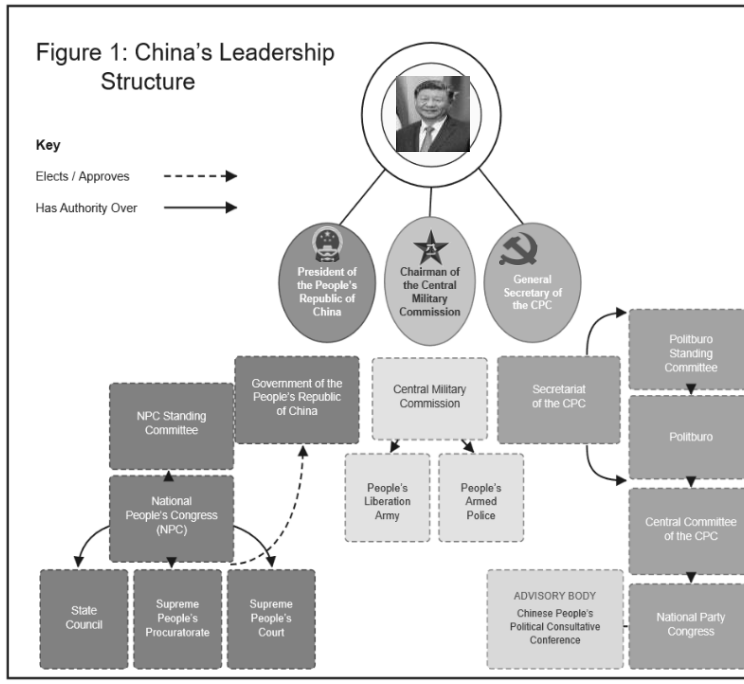


Figure 1. Institutional Relationship among the CCP, State and CMC

Central Committee Plenums

A plenum is a full assembly of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, nominally the body that selects the Politburo, its Standing Committee, and the CMC under the CCP Constitution. The political reality is the opposite; the party's senior-most leaders determine the composition of the Central Committee through opaque backroom negotiation.[8] The Fourth Plenum of 20–23 Oct 25 extended beyond its conventional governance agenda to ratify military personnel changes and endorse the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–30). Its most striking feature was the number of absentees. 168 members and 147 alternates attended, against the 205 full members and 171 alternates who constituted the 20th Party Congress in 2022. The PLA was worst hit, with 27 of 42[9] military members absent, including 22 generals—a 63 per cent absence rate.

The Purges and Implications

An external shock sharpened this. Russia's failure to subdue a weaker Ukraine after Feb 2022 showed how systemic corruption, inflated readiness returns, and neglected equipment hollow a force that looks formidable on paper, and PLA researchers studied the campaign closely.[10] The lesson reinforced rather than moderated President Xi's method; the remedy chosen was deeper political control, not professional autonomy.[11]

President Xi Jinping began by systematically dismantling the patronage networks of the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras, blending organisational reformation, ideological re-indoctrination via the 2014 Gutian Conference, and legal-administrative tools to fuse political loyalty with command authority under the 'CMC Chairman Responsibility System'.[12] Reliance shifted from the Fujian coterie and 31st Group Army to the Shaanxi faction, yet later waves showed that factional and familial proximity offered no safeguard. By integrating Party discipline organs, the NPC, and the CMC into a continuous purge mechanism, President Xi has turned anti-corruption into a tool that suppresses succession, weakens institutional bonds, and implants enduring fear across the PLA. The precedent has since hardened, with a military court awarding suspended death sentences to General Wei Fenghe and General Li Shangfu, China's two most recent Defence Ministers, exceeding the life terms given to General Guo Boxiong in 2016 and General Fang Fenghui in 2019.[13] That one of them was pursued after retirement carries its own message; leaving service confers no immunity, and the campaign's reach is retrospective as well as ongoing.

Factional Chessboard of Xi and PLA

A contest of ambition and loyalty has unfolded within China's CMC since the CCP's 20th Congress in Oct 22. General He Weidong made an audacious 'Triple Jump' straight to CMC Vice Chairman,[14]—leapfrogging General Zhang Shengmin despite inferior qualifications and later entry into the CMC. For General Zhang Shengmin, the message was unmistakable; he remained an outsider, valued only as the discipline commission's instrument. With his help and that of

General Zhang Youxia, President Xi purged General He Weidong and Admiral Miao Hua before the 4th Plenum, the first removal of a sitting CMC Vice Chairman since 1967 and unthinkable under Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin. General Zhang Shengmin has since been elevated to Vice Chairman, though without the customary Politburo seat, and General He Weidong's seat remains vacant. On Jan 26, General Zhang Youxia and Joint Staff Chief General Liu Zhenli were placed under investigation**;** the charge levelled against him, of trampling the chairman responsibility system, is an explicitly political offence rather than a criminal one. That distinguishes this wave from the prosecutions of General Xu Caihou and General Guo Boxiong a decade earlier.

The erstwhile Strategic Support Force, which held space, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities under one roof, was dissolved on 19 Apr 24 and its functions were redistributed to the newly raised Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force and Information Support Force.[15] Its last two commanders subsequently disappeared from public view, and in Jun 26 the serving commander of the Cyberspace Force was removed, leaving the PLA's newest arms under leadership that is itself provisional.[16]

Discipline Below the Command Echelon

The disciplinary drive is not confined to the apex. Instructions circulated through PLA units during 2026 direct officers to refuse routine social approaches connected with recruitment and procurement and to submit their personal circles to party committee scrutiny.[17] An officer corps conditioned to treat ordinary reciprocity as a disciplinary hazard becomes an officer corps that refers decisions upward and avoids ambiguity. The paralysis visible at the CMC is thus being reproduced at the troop level. The same logic has been applied at the lower ranks for whom the Ministry of National Defence's Conscription Office promulgated a code of ethics built around political loyalty, integrity and the transparent exercise of power. It followed a Politburo meeting on 30 Jul 26, at which President Xi called for stronger political guidance and linked political loyalty directly to military effectiveness, while urging decisive progress toward the PLA's centenary modernisation goals.[18]

System Thinking Analysis: Promotion-Purge Cycle

While individual purges might seem justifiable when considered independently, their collective impact, characterised by frequent leadership changes, pervasive institutional apprehension, diminished confidence, and postponed operational risks, becomes evident only when analysed as components of a feedback-influenced system.

A clearer understanding of these underlying dynamics emerges when the operative forces are visualised in a Causal Loop Diagram (CLD), as presented in Figure 2. This CLD illustrates President Xi's reliance on PLA purges as a manifestation of the 'Shifting the Burden' systems archetype. Faced with the fundamental challenge of maintaining unwavering political authority while upholding military efficacy, President Xi appears to favour a solution that addresses immediate symptoms. The purges are framed as anti-corruption and loyalty enforcement rather than the slower, fundamental solution of institutionalisation. The reinforcing loop R1 converts threat perception into purges and short-term obedience while eroding the very trust that generated the threat perception. The balancing loop B1 registers the resulting churn, degraded joint planning, and strategic vulnerability only after a lag, which is why the fundamental solution loop R2 remains undeveloped.

The Jun–Jul 2026 cycle validates the model precisely: a purge wave, loyalist promotions within a week, and no replenishment of the institution itself. The system is accelerating its R1 loop while the costs of the balancing loop accrue in the background.– Breaking the cycle would require institutionalised promotion and a reduced reliance on purges; without that, the condition becomes permanent. The Soviet precedent indicates where the cost surfaces. Glantz records that by Jun 1941 Soviet officers routinely commanded two levels above their experience. The PLA is now reproducing that condition.[19] Convention requires CMC members to hold full general rank and prior command of a major department, theatre, or service, yet dozens of key posts are now discharged de facto by lieutenant generals promoted within the past year.[20]

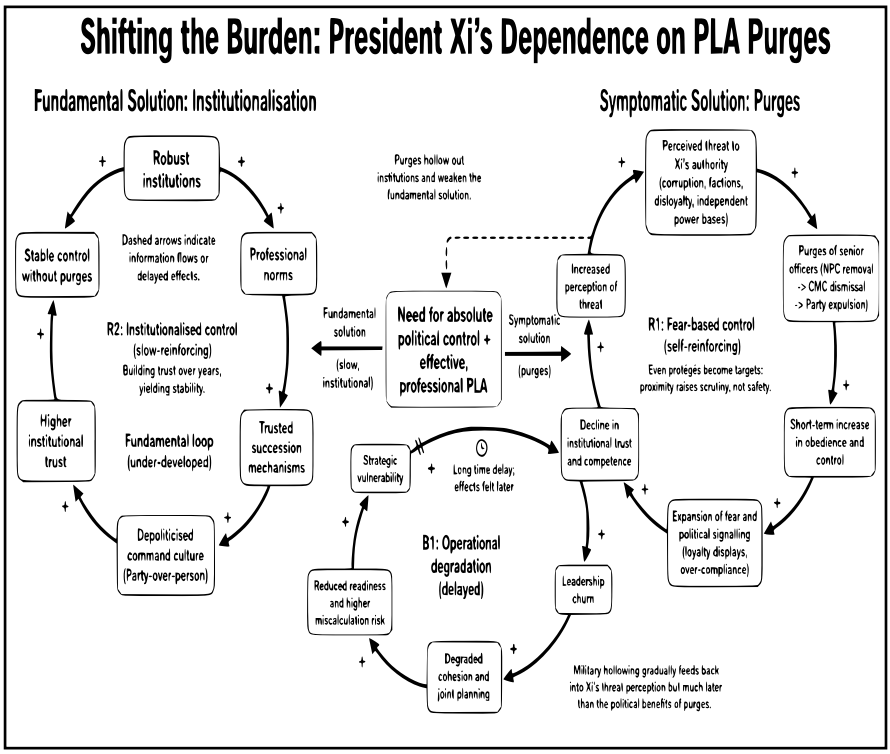


Figure 2. Causal Loop Diagram for Xi Jinping's Purges

India's Risks and Opportunities

Continuity Below, Paralysis Above. Corrective is essential. Despite the purges, training opposite India has continued undisturbed; annual mobilisation, winter acclimatisation and contingency joint exercises have run as scheduled every year since 2022, opened each January by the Training Mobilisation Order.[21] What insulates the PLA is the institutionalisation of operational knowledge. Border units remain in the same theatre for long tenures, so terrain familiarity and the memory of past face-offs reside in the formation rather than the individual. What has been paralysed is the authority above the unit to act on that memory. The measure of that paralysis is time. In 2024, the PLA launched major exercises around Taiwan within three to four days of a perceived provocation; in 2025, with theatre and CMC leadership gutted, the same machine took nineteen days in Apr and twelve in Dec.[22] The PLA still knows how

to fight; it just hasn't decided to. That gap, not any assumed incompetence, is India's opportunity.

PLA Purges: Loyalty vs Institutional Strain

- If continuity holds below, the churn above is severe. Purges have reshaped the PLA into a force prioritising loyalty over competence, cautious yet volatile along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The Western Theatre Command (WTC) has had four commanders since Galwan 2020, and the Jun 26 removal of its Political Commissar left both halves of the theatre's dual command vacant. In the PLA's dual command system, the Commander and Commissar jointly authorise consequential decisions, so this is unprecedented in the post-1979 PLA. India's window here is narrow but high-leverage, if it builds capability for tempo dominance, ISR superiority, dual-use infrastructure, narrative building, and calibrated diplomacy. The replacement pattern compounds it. Of twenty key posts reassigned in the current reshuffle, nine went to air force officers, and only two of the five theatre commanders have been publicly confirmed, both of them airmen.[23] For a theatre facing India, long a ground-force country, an air-force-weighted rebuilding of the high command implies a further period of unfamiliarity before the WTC settles.

- Vary patrol frequency in time (timing and duration), space (location and frequency), and force (quantum and composition) domains to impose operational asymmetry, forcing PLA risk-aversion without crossing thresholds.

- Complete strategic border infrastructure (roads, underground storage, helipads, all-weather airfields, etc.) in the 12–18-month leadership void before potential rebound by 2027.

Recentralised Control and India's Moral Ascendancy

- Recentralisation, not weakness, drives this. Along the 3488 Km border, this produces a paradox: a leaderless WTC lacking strategic guidance, generating disjointed information-warfare aggression alongside operational diffidence. By

maintaining restraint, upholding protocols and prioritising dialogue, India will position itself as the mature actor, recasting PLA friction as domestic insecurity rather than Indian provocation.

- Emphasise India's non-provocative record in the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) on India-China Border Affairs, Special Representatives (SR) and Senior Commander forums, where the contrast with PLA conduct along the LAC facilitates third-party support.

- Open additional Border Personnel Meeting points and leverage the moral high ground in QUAD and UN narratives towards restoring the pre-Apr 2020 status quo.

WTC and Rocket Force Weaknesses

- The Rocket Force has been the hardest-hit branch; its command team was removed in Jul 23, and their successor followed in Oct 25. US intelligence assessments reported in Jan 24 attributed the crisis to fuelling irregularities and silo lids that would not open, that is, to the procurement chain rather than to individual commanders. Export performance has compounded the doubt. The same HQ-9 family has now been defeated in three theatres in eighteen months: in Operation SINDOOR,[24] over Iran[25] and in Venezuela, where a layered Russian, Chinese and Iranian air defence collapsed inside an hour.[26] This constrains China's escalation ladder against Indian salience, though insecure commanders risk miscalculation.

- The evidence must nonetheless be weighed with care, because Beijing has answered every corruption report with a demonstration rather than a denial. An intercontinental ballistic missile was fired some 12,000 km into the Pacific in Sep 24, the first such launch in 44 years,[27]–and a submarine-launched missile some 7,300 km into the South Pacific in Jul 26.[28]

- Export failure and strategic reach are not the same thing. The purges have degraded decision-making authority, not delivery capacity.

Tibet-Xinjiang Distractions Amplify Strain

- Unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, compounded by the purges, forces the PLA to spend 40% of training time on ideological drills,[29] diverting WTC focus from LAC readiness to internal security. Politicised units prioritise obedience over warfighting ability, rendering them inward-looking and hesitant.

- Conduct deliberate senior-leader profiling in WTC using information on purge cycles, tenure instability, and promotion patterns to anticipate hesitation thresholds.

- Exploit distraction through stepped-up administrative support to the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) to raise the 'Free Tibet' issue and counter PLA cartographic assertions.

The Maritime Dimension. The far-seas project has not been spared. The naval officer who ran the CMC Political Work Department and controlled senior promotions was removed in Nov 24, and the Navy's commander has not appeared in public since late 2025.[30] By then, the PLAN had regularised far-seas training, operating two carrier groups beyond the First Island Chain in Jun 25.[31] The Air Force faces the same problem, since maritime strike, long-range surveillance and air cover for distant task groups are its responsibility, and its Political Commissar was removed in Jun 26. Distant deployment is the least forgiving test of a command system because it runs on delegated authority, which the purges have withdrawn. In the Indian Ocean, at the end of a long logistic tether and under surveillance from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, that dependence is sharpest.

Translating Advantages into Enduring Leverage

- India's decentralised mission command, established acclimatisation regime and visible sustainment outmatch c caution. Battlefield credibility, dominance of the LAC through patrols and ISR, and infrastructure development should translate directly into WMCC and Corps Commander negotiating power.

- Link confidence-building measure and trade normalisation to verified patrolling discipline via WMCC, demanding WTC leadership transparency.

- Accelerate Rafale/Su-30MKI forward basing, border roads and Andaman Nicobar hardening within the 12–18-month window, while enhancing QUAD coordination and strengthening multiple minilateral partnerships with SE Asian countries to strengthen own capability to operate at will up to the Malacca Strait.

Deliberate a Review of Unit Rotation Policy Along the LAC

- The PLA's residual strength is continuity of tenure, while Indian units in most sectors change every two years, taking terrain knowledge and acclimatisation with them. The Rashtriya Rifles model in Eastern Ladakh, where the unit remains and personnel rotate, should be tested against two-yearly infantry turnover for operational familiarity, acclimatisation cost, quality of border personnel meeting engagement and continuity of the negotiating record. India's institutional memory should reside in the formation and the file, not depart with the outgoing Commanding Officer and unit.

- Establish an indicator watch list. Five measurable series should be tracked: the standard and tempo of Chinese contingents in United Nations peacekeeping operations; the frequency and complexity of joint and combined exercises; leadership continuity, measured as mean tenure in appointment and the share of billets held in an acting capacity; procurement announcements and equipment induction rates; and Rocket Force test activity. Divergence between declared modernisation and these series is the earliest measure of whether the trade is being paid for.

Conclusion

The purges have left the CMC with President Xi and General Zhang Shengmin alone, while theatre, service and military district commands across the PLA are run on acting authority, stalling joint

operations and modernisation. The void reflects absolute distrust and has made loyalty the measure in place of competence. The vacancy at WTC creates a rare 12–18-month window that India must exploit through ISR profiling of leadership gaps, infrastructure surges, tempo-dominant patrols, and SR, WMCC, and Higher Military Commander talks linking CBMs to verified disengagement, before reconstitution in 2027. The Jul 26 promotions, which restored the discipline apparatus ahead of the operational chain, are the first visible sign of reconstitution and confirm that this window has already begun to close. The maritime corollary holds equally; the same lack of settled authority constrains Chinese operations far from home, and India's positional advantage against them is greatest in the Indian Ocean Region.

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