



A CHANGING OF THE GUARD?

THE DYNAMICS INFLUENCING CHINA'S MILITARY

AUTHOR

Major Ben Cutter is student on the Land Command and Staff Course. He was formerly a Chief of the General Staff Fellow and gained a Master's degree in Conflict, Security and Development at the University of Exeter.



CHACR

The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research is the British Army's think tank and tasked with enhancing the conceptual component of its fighting power. The views expressed in this *In Depth Briefing* are those of the author, and not of the CHACR, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Ministry of Defence or the British Army. The aim of the briefing is to provide a neutral platform for external researchers and experts to offer their views on critical issues. This document cannot be reproduced or used in part or whole without the permission of the CHACR.

www.chacr.org.uk

THERE was a sense of inevitability when the news broke on 24th October 2023 that General Li Shangfu had been dismissed as China's Defence Minister.¹ Li's removal, which came less than a year into his appointment as Defence Minister, followed a near two month – speculation-filled – absence from public view.² However, Li's dismissal has not taken place in isolation. Instead, it has come amidst a growing purge of senior People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers. Driven by a reinvigorated anti-corruption campaign across the PLA,³ the last few months have seen the detention of the commander, political commissar and former deputy commander of the Rocket Force,⁴ the removal of the PLA's military court chief and the arrest of at least 39 other senior officers and political officials.⁵

To understand the factors driving

this purge of senior officers, it is important to consider them through the prism of the two powerful dynamics that have defined the PLA's evolution for over the last decade. The first is Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Xi Jinping's determination to tighten his and the party's grip over the PLA. The second is Xi's simultaneous effort to transform the PLA's military effectiveness. Motivated by the CCP's absolute prioritisation of the security of its regime in China and desire to create a military capable of fighting and winning the wars that will realise its strategic end of national rejuvenation, the achievement of these goals has been a central feature of Xi's rule since 2012. However, despite the transformative impact that Xi's decade-long pursuit of these objectives has already had on the PLA, China's leader has maintained a lingering mistrust in the loyalty of its leadership and its operational effectiveness. The result has been the unleashing

of a new wave of corruption investigations designed to further entrench Xi's control over the PLA and remove the barriers, created by corrupt practises, to enhancing its operational effectiveness.

XI'S TIGHTENING GRIP

Xi's drive to tighten his grip on the PLA has been a central feature of his leadership since becoming CCP General Secretary

¹Katherin Hille and Cheng Leng. *China removes defence minister two months after disappearance.* *The Financial Times.* 24 October 23.

²*The Economist.* Rumours swirl after China's defence minister, Li Shangfu, is sacked. *The Economist.* 26 Oct 23.

³Kathrin Hille and Edward White. *Absolute Loyalty: Xi Jinping turns anti-corruption focus to China's Military.* *The Financial Times.* 31 Jul 23.

⁴Katherin Hille. *China ousts top generals from nuclear Rocket Force.* *The Financial Times.* 31 Jul 2023.

⁵Hille and White. *Absolute Loyalty: Xi Jinping turns anti-corruption focus to China's Military.*

in 2012 and has been a key dynamic shaping the evolution of the PLA over the last decade. Motivated by the belief he had inherited a PLA that had drifted dangerously away from the party's control,⁶ Xi has employed numerous levers to systematically strengthen his authority over the military and reinforce its loyalty to him.⁷ Alongside successive anti-corruption campaigns, this has seen Xi accumulate an unprecedented level of centralised institutional power over the military, reinvigorate political education and strengthen the role of the PLA's political officers.

Xi's concerns about the CCP's diminishing control over the armed forces is inextricably linked to the PLA's institutional status as the army of the party, rather than China's national military.⁸ This distinction is important. As the armed wing of the CCP,⁹ the PLA's primary purpose is not to serve the interests of the Chinese state, but instead the far narrower interests of the CCP. Central to these interests are Xi and the CCP's absolute prioritisation of preserving the party's rule, under

the leadership of Xi Jinping, over China.¹⁰ Consequently, for Xi and the CCP, the PLA occupies a vital institutional position as the ultimate guarantor of their rule in China.¹¹

Xi's existential framing of the PLA as the regime's security guarantor is strongly influenced by his understanding of history. The spectre of the Soviet Union's collapse, which Xi blames on the Soviet Communist Party's growing corruption, ideological demise and loss of control over the Red Army,¹² alongside the trauma of Tiananmen Square, where several PLA units refused to confront the protesters that pushed the CCP to the brink of its own collapse, continue to haunt Xi's thinking.¹³ It has shaped his insistence that the party must stand firm on its leadership over the military, claiming that this was 'the lesson from the collapse of the Soviet Union'.¹⁴ From Xi's perspective, history's key lesson is that ensuring control over a PLA loyal to him and the CCP is fundamental to the continuation of his and the party's rule in China.¹⁵ The alternative would be to surrender his and the party's

ability to call on their critical instrument of coercive power in a future domestic crisis, the implications of which would be catastrophic.

The first pillar of Xi's efforts to strengthen his control over the PLA has been his accumulation of an ever greater degree of institutional and personal power over the military. As China's most powerful leader since Mao,¹⁶ Xi has used his position as chairman of the Central Military Commission, China's highest military decision making body, to assert his ultimate authority over military decisions, significantly increase military inspections,¹⁷ and centralise numerous powerful investigative and disciplinary bodies under his direct control.¹⁸

Xi has combined this vast institutional power with growing control over the appointment and promotion of senior officers across the PLA. In this sense, Xi, like all Chinese leaders, has attempted to appoint loyalists into important and influential positions across the CCP and PLA.¹⁹ However, it is the reach

⁶Derek Grossman and Michael S. Chase. *Xi's Purge of the Military*. RAND. 2016.

⁷US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*. P43.

⁸Charles Parton. *China's Military Setup is Designed to foil any would be Prigozhin*. *The Financial Times*. 29 Jun 23.

⁹US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023: Annual Report to Congress*. 2023. P43.

¹⁰Charles Parton. *China's Military Setup is Designed to foil any would be Prigozhin*.

¹¹*Ibid*.

¹²Jeremy Page. *Command or Control: Xi Jinping is obsessed with loyalty in the PLA*. *The Economist*. 11 November 2023.

¹³Charles Parton. *China's Military Setup is Designed to foil any would be Prigozhin*.

¹⁴*The Economist*. *The Prince Podcast*. Episode 4: 'Man Enough'. 2022.

¹⁵Bonnie Glaser and Phillip Saunders. *Shakeup in the PLA Rocket Force*. *China Global Podcast*. Episode 59. *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*. 29 Aug 23.

¹⁶*Economy*. *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*. Oxford University Press. 2018. P11.

¹⁷Wulfnor. *Why Xi Jinping Doesn't Trust his own Military*.

¹⁸Hille and White. *Absolute Loyalty: Xi Jinping turns anti-corruption focus to China's Military*.

¹⁹*Economy*. *The Third Revolution*. P23.

“AS CHINA'S MOST POWERFUL LEADER SINCE MAO, XI HAS USED HIS POSITION AS CHAIRMAN OF THE CENTRAL MILITARY COMMISSION TO ASSERT HIS ULTIMATE AUTHORITY OVER MILITARY DECISIONS.”



Picture: UN Photo/Pierre Albouy/ CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

of Xi's influence over senior PLA appointments that has made his control over the PLA exceptional. With Xi now reported to oversee all appointments and promotions down to the rank of major general,²⁰ he has not only ensured the appointment of loyalists into the heights of the six-man Central Military Commission,²¹ but also the creation of a senior officer cohort that is increasingly defined by its political reliability and personal loyalty to him.

The second pillar of Xi's effort to impose his control over the PLA has been his reinvigoration of ideology across the military. This ideological renaissance reflects Xi's concern that the PLA, much like the CCP writ large, had, over the two decades prior to his rule, lost sight of the core ideological rationale that was key to ensuring the political loyalty of its personnel.²² Xi's renewed emphasis on political indoctrination has seen it become a central feature of the PLA's training programme. PLA officers and soldiers are reported to spend as much as a quarter of their time on political education.²³ An important feature of the political curriculum is its emphasis on reinforcing the increasingly personalised nature of Xi's leadership. This has seen 'Xi Jinping thought', and more specifically, 'Xi Jinping thought on strengthening the military', becoming the foundational texts for the PLA's political education programme.²⁴

The third pillar of Xi's efforts to gain greater control over the PLA has been the significant strengthening of the political officers', better known as commissars, position in the PLA's dual chain-of-command system. Charged with extending the party's authority over the PLA,²⁵ it is unsurprising that the commissars have been central to Xi's attempts to assert his control over the military and reconnect it with its ideological



roots. While in the Soviet system operational commanders held ultimate authority over the commissars, in the PLA commissars have historically maintained equal authority with operational commanders.²⁶ However, Xi's efforts to increase the party's control over the PLA have seen him tip the balance of power towards the commissars.²⁷ Consequently, commissars have exerted a growing influence over everything from routine in-barracks activity to critical operational decisions right down to the level of an individual submarine, fighter squadron or battalion.²⁸ This, combined with their monitoring of the political reliability of individual personnel and pivotal role in vetting appointments and promotions,²⁹ has seen the commissars become vital agents in Xi's efforts to secure his control of the PLA and to ensure its political fealty.

Underpinning these three pillars has been Xi's use of anti-corruption campaigns to investigate and remove PLA officers deemed to be insufficiently loyal to him and the party. The coercive power and scale of these campaigns have seen them become Xi's most powerful tool for bringing the PLA to heel.³⁰ For Xi, the example of the Soviet Union demonstrated the existential risk posed by

endemic corruption to the CCP's rule.³¹ Importantly, these concerns were not necessarily new within the CCP's senior leadership. Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao warned in 2011 that unchecked corruption could lead to the collapse of the party and the country.³² However, it has been the scale and impact of Xi's counter-corruption campaigns, which have been more personal, profound and political than those of any of his predecessors, that have set them apart from previous efforts to tackle corruption across the CCP and PLA.³³

The scale of corruption within the PLA prior to Xi's rule should not be underestimated. Dozens of generals were caught in Xi's early dragnet³⁴ as he sought to impose his personal authority over the PLA. Notable amongst these initial victims were former Chief of the Joint Staff General Fang Fenghui, and Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, two former Central Military Commission vice-chairmen who had previously served as China's most senior military officer.³⁵ The monumental levels of corruption in the PLA revealed by Xu and Guo's detentions in 2014-15 were indicative of the defining influence that corruption had come to have over the PLA.³⁶ Such was the pervasiveness of this influence that every senior PLA officer appointed under Xu and Guo's

leadership was believed to have bought their rank in a vast cash for promotion scheme overseen by the disgraced former generals.³⁷ Xi's successive and aggressive anti-graft campaigns have allowed him to start addressing corruption's corrosive influence in the PLA and to assert his personal control over the military. Alongside dismissing numerous corrupt generals,³⁸ Xi has used corruption investigations to break up the patronage networks that perpetuate corrupt practises

²⁰ Wuthnow. *Why Xi Jinping Doesn't Trust his own Military*.

²¹ US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*. P42

²² *Economy. The Third Revolution*. P8.

²³ Page. *Command or Control: Xi Jinping is obsessed with loyalty in the PLA*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ John Grady. *Political Commissars on Chinese Warships Play Crucial Role in Interactions With Foreign Vessels*. *US Naval Institute News*. 3 Jun 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Scobell. *Xi Jinping's Worst Nightmare: A Potemkin PLA*.

³⁰ Grossman and Chase. *Xi's Purge of the Military*.

³¹ *The Economist. The Prince Podcast. Episode 4: 'Man Enough'*. 2022.

³² *Economy. The Third Revolution*. P29.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Scobell. *Xi Jinping's Worst Nightmare: A Potemkin PLA*.

³⁵ US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*. P42

³⁶ Wuthnow. *Why Xi Jinping doesn't trust his own military*. *Foreign Affairs*. 26 Sep 23.

³⁷ Glaser and Saunders. *Shakeup in the PLA Rocket Force*.

³⁸ Andrew Scobell. *Xi Jinping's Worst Nightmare: A Potemkin PLA. War on the Rocks*. 1 May 23.

³⁹ US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*. P42.

within the PLA and threaten his authority over it.³⁹ Notably, although the targeting of the most egregious instances of corruption has been a priority for Xi's campaigns, they have also served a more distinctively political purpose. In particular, they have been a key tool used by Xi to remove officers aligned with rival CCP factions and other senior PLA figures deemed to have questionable loyalties.⁴⁰ The cumulative result of these dismissals, alongside all of Xi's wider efforts, has been a significant tightening of his personal control over the PLA and its leadership.⁴¹

CREATING AN ARMY THAT CAN FIGHT AND WIN WARS

Xi's ambition to improve the PLA's operational effectiveness is the second key dynamic which has shaped the military's development since he came to power in 2012. This ambition has been underpinned by Xi's belief that possessing a military capable of fighting and winning wars is a fundamental pre-requisite for achieving the Chinese Dream.⁴² For Xi and the CCP, realising the Chinese Dream and China's national rejuvenation is the ultimate strategic objective for the party and, amidst declining economic growth, an

increasingly important source of its legitimacy.⁴³ Importantly, by linking the PLA's operational effectiveness and ability to fight and win wars with China's national rejuvenation, Xi has made the PLA's capability, capacity, and the competency of its personnel a critical component of his grand strategic policy agenda. This strategic imperative to create a PLA capable of fighting and winning wars has been further reinforced by this goal being a key pre-requisite for achieving several other conditions for China's national rejuvenation. Most notable amongst these is the importance of a credible and effective PLA as an instrument for securing Taiwan's 'reunification' with the Chinese mainland – a goal which Xi has repeatedly refused to rule out the use of force to achieve and which he has asserted is essential for realising national rejuvenation and the Chinese Dream.⁴⁴

In his effort to increase the PLA's ability to fight and win wars, Xi has adopted a three-pronged approach. This has seen a renewed emphasis on the professional competency of the PLA's personnel, the implementation of transformative institutional reforms and overseen massive increases in China's military expenditure. Xi's desire to refocus the attention of the PLA's senior leadership on their professional competency was evident in a landmark speech he gave in 2014. This saw Xi accuse the PLA's officers of being too lax in their duties and overly focused

on personal aggrandisement at the expense of their professional responsibilities and abilities.⁴⁵ The need for greater professional military competency amongst the PLA's officers, including its political officers, has also been a prominent theme in the PLA's internal publications. A 2016 article in the *PLA Daily* criticised officers who sat in conference halls more than war rooms, held pens more than guns and read texts more than maps.⁴⁶ The article went on to argue that such officers risked becoming observers in training and amateurs in battle.⁴⁷

Xi has combined this renewed emphasis on the PLA's professional competency with transformative institutional reforms. In 2016 he introduced the most significant reorganisation of the Chinese military since the 1950s.⁴⁸ Intended to address the PLA's 'two incompatibilities', which assert that the PLA is both insufficiently modernised and lacking the capabilities required to prevail in a 21st century conflict,⁴⁹ Xi's reforms have focused on streamlining the PLA, enhancing inter-service cooperation and enabling joint force operations.⁵⁰ Although primarily shaped by a clear military logic, changes such as elevating the PLA Navy and Air Force to equal status with the PLA Army was key to creating a genuinely joint force, by allowing Xi to appoint and promote allies into new command positions and organisational structures, an important secondary effect of the

reform programme has been a further entrenching of his control over the PLA.⁵¹

Xi's ambition to create a PLA capable of fighting and winning wars has also underpinned a massive increase in China's military expenditure.⁵² Between 2012 and 2022 China's official defence budget more than doubled from \$106 to \$230 billion.⁵³ This vast increase in the PLA's funding has catalysed a rapid acceleration in China's decades long military modernisation effort.⁵⁴ Notably,

⁴⁰Glaser and Saunders. *Shakeup in the PLA Rocket Force*.

⁴¹Andrew Scobell. *Xi Jinping's Worst Nightmare: A Potemkin PLA. War on the Rocks*. 1 May 23.

⁴²Economy. *The Third Revolution*. P4.

⁴³Kerry Brown and Kalley Wu Tzu-Hui. *The Trouble with Taiwan: History, the United States and a Rising China*. Zed Books. 2019. P111.

⁴⁴Xi Jinping. *Report to the 19th Party Congress*. *China Daily*. Nov 17.

⁴⁵Wuthnow. *Why Xi Jinping Doesn't Trust his own Military*.

⁴⁶Page. *Command or Control: Xi Jinping is obsessed with loyalty in the PLA*.

⁴⁷*Ibid*.

⁴⁸Wuthnow. *Why Xi Jinping Doesn't Trust his own Military*.

⁴⁹Scobell. *Xi Jinping's Worst Nightmare: A Potemkin PLA*.

⁵⁰*Ibid*.

⁵¹Economy. *The Third Revolution*. P26.

⁵²Wuthnow. *Why Xi Jinping Doesn't Trust his own Military*.

⁵³*Ibid*.

⁵⁴Oriana Mastro. *The Taiwan Temptation: Why Beijing Might Resort to Force*. *Foreign Affairs*. 100:4 PP58-67. 2021.



Target Taipei: Xi considers Taiwan's 'reunification' essential to the Chinese Dream Picture: Ethan Lin on Unsplash

reflecting the mutually reinforcing influences of Xi's conditions for national rejuvenation, much of this modernisation has been directed at enhancing the PLA's ability to seize and hold Taiwan.⁵⁵ With an estimated 40 per cent of the PLA's budget allocated to equipment procurement, China's vast increases in military spending have underpinned the PLA's pursuit of its ambitious modernisation goals. Most notably, its reported aim to acquire the capabilities required to launch a successful invasion of Taiwan by 2027. This has seen the PLA acquire the world's largest navy, a fleet of new aircraft carriers, advanced fighter aircraft and a significant expansion in the size and sophistication of its nuclear arsenal.⁵⁶ The result is that China's leaders, having previously considered a successful military campaign to take Taiwan as the stuff of fantasy, are increasingly considering it to be a real possibility.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, corruption's influence over the PLA's operational effectiveness has been a persistent concern for Xi and posed significant challenges to its progress towards becoming a force capable of fighting and winning wars. While the intent of China's lavish defence spending may have been to enable the PLA to realise its



“CHINA'S VAST INCREASES IN MILITARY SPENDING... HAS SEEN THE PLA ACQUIRE THE WORLD'S LARGEST NAVY, A FLEET OF NEW AIRCRAFT CARRIERS, ADVANCED FIGHTER AIRCRAFT AND A SIGNIFICANT EXPANSION IN THE SIZE AND SOPHISTICATION OF ITS NUCLEAR ARSENAL.”

ambitious modernisation goals, in particular its reported aim to acquire the capabilities required to launch a successful invasion of Taiwan by 2027,⁵⁸ it has also created huge opportunities for personal enrichment by senior officers. The result has been an enduring level of corruption across the military that has undermined its readiness and the quality of its equipment and personnel. Persistent issues linked to corruption have included enduring logistics shortfalls, poor maintenance standards, a lack of readiness, limited equipment availability and the sale of ammunition overseas by PLA personnel.⁵⁹ The impact of corruption has not just been limited to the PLA's equipment and readiness. As the implication of virtually every senior officer in the vast cash for promotions scandal exposed by Guo and Xu's arrests in 2014-15⁶⁰ demonstrated, corruption has also had a significant impact on the quality and competency of its personnel. Specifically, it highlighted that it had been the capacity to bribe, rather than professional competency, which had been the principal factor underlying the progression of most senior officers' careers. Xi's use of corruption investigations to address these issues within the PLA has been symptomatic of a wider and prominent theme

of his rule. Specifically, the close connection that Xi has drawn between performance shortfalls and the launching of corruption investigations which have led to officials being dismissed. A notable recent example was the purge of officials linked to the massive state-backed semiconductor investment fund following its failure to meet the ambitious targets set by the 'Made in China 2025' industrial strategy. Implicit in this approach to tackling corruption is a recognition that its complete elimination, both within the PLA and the wider CCP, is an unrealistic objective. Instead, there is a willingness to turn a blind eye so long as individuals are perceived to be sufficiently loyal and performance targets are met. Consequently, for Xi, when it comes to dealing with corruption within the military, success looks like holding it at a level where it does not excessively undermine the PLA's operational effectiveness.

Nonetheless, limiting the extent of the rot created by corruption in the PLA, and the seriousness of its potential impact on its operational effectiveness, will have been one of the key lessons taken away by Xi from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Having witnessed the under-performance of a Russian military severely weakened by massive

corruption,⁶¹ Xi will be under no illusion about the potentially devastating consequences of unchecked corruption on the PLA's ability to fight and win wars. With a competent, capable and effective PLA being central to guaranteeing the CCP's domestic security and its ambitious, revisionist foreign policy agenda,⁶² tackling corruption has become fundamental not only for ensuring Xi's political survival, but also for realising China's national rejuvenation.

UNDERSTANDING THE RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

It is through the lens of these twin dynamics that the recent developments in the PLA's senior leadership can be understood. The renewed purge of senior officers demonstrates that, despite his decade long efforts, Xi remains dissatisfied with the extent of his control over the PLA, its loyalty to him and its progress towards greater operational effectiveness. Catalysed by securing a third term as the CCP's General Secretary in October 2022, Xi has turned to some of his most powerful tools for driving change through the PLA to address the continued challenges presented to his control over the military and its ability to fight and win wars. The result has been the unleashing of a new wave of corruption investigations designed to remove

⁵⁵Mastro. *The Taiwan Temptation*.

⁵⁶Wuthnow. *Why Xi Jinping Doesn't Trust his own Military*.

⁵⁷Mastro. *The Taiwan Temptation*.

⁵⁸US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*. P34.

⁵⁹Palmer. *China replaces top Rocket Force Commanders*. *Foreign Policy*. 1 August 23.

⁶⁰Glaser and Saunders. *Shakeup in the PLA Rocket Force*.

⁶¹Scobell. *Xi Jinping's Worst Nightmare: A Potemkin PLA*.

⁶²US Department of Defence. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023*. P35.

those deemed to be insufficiently loyal, excessively incompetent and overly corrupt from the PLA's senior leadership.

Xi's enduring dissatisfaction with the extent of his control over the military and its loyalty to him has been a prominent feature of his engagement with the PLA since late 2022. In a speech in July 2023 he directed military leaders to focus on solving the persistent problems associated with enforcing the party's absolute leadership over the PLA at all levels.⁶³ However, it has been within the PLA's Rocket Force, which as the branch responsible for China's land-based nuclear and conventional missile arsenal is the PLA's most strategically significant and sensitive service,⁶⁴ that the impact of Xi's efforts to further extend his control over the PLA have been most profound.

Xi's focus on the Rocket Force has been driven by his growing mistrust of the Force, which since late 2022 has found itself being targeted by a wide-ranging corruption investigation and surrounded by rumours linking it to the leaking of military secrets. The double removal of Li Yuchao and Xu Zhongbo as the commander and commissar of the Rocket Force in July 2023⁶⁵ emphatically demonstrated Xi's loss of faith in the Rocket Force's leadership. Although publicly linked to the long-standing corruption investigation,⁶⁶ observers identified an anticipated shift in China's nuclear doctrine to a 'launch on warning' posture,⁶⁷ as being the key catalyst of Li and Xu's removal. Such a posture, which would require the PLA to be capable of launching a nuclear counterstrike in the time between an adversary's missiles being launched and then striking their targets (a period measured in minutes),⁶⁸ necessitates delegating far greater autonomy and authority to field commanders.⁶⁹ Importantly, the delegation of such immense responsibilities

requires Xi to have a commensurate level of trust in the Rocket Force's officers. However, presented with a leadership team⁷⁰ dogged by persistent allegations of corruption and espionage, Xi is unlikely to have had sufficient faith in the political reliability of some of his most important military subordinates.⁷¹ The result was the removal of Li and Xu, alongside seven other senior Rocket Force officers.

The influence of Xi's desire to extend his control over the Rocket Force and ensure its political reliability have been further illustrated by the personnel selected to replace the removed officers. The decision to appoint officers drawn from the PLA Navy and PLA Air Force to replace the sacked Rocket Force commanders⁷² highlighted Xi's enduring concerns about the wider political reliability of the Rocket Force's officers. Furthermore, Xi's decision to turn to officers from outside the Force to command it demonstrated his prioritisation of political loyalty, rather than professional experience or competence, as the key condition for promotion and appointment into these key PLA positions.

Xi's continued frustration with the PLA's progress towards becoming a force capable of fighting and winning wars has been another key driver of the recent developments in the PLA's senior leadership. A notable feature of these developments has been the focus of the ongoing anti-corruption investigations on the PLA's Equipment Development Department. This focus on the PLA department responsible for the procurement of modernised military equipment points to the emergence of growing concerns with the performance of kit and equipment recently acquired by the PLA. With the PLA's equipment modernisation programme forming one of the bedrocks of Xi's ambition

to create a military capable of fighting and winning wars, these performance shortfalls are likely to have been perceived as posing an unacceptable threat to the achievement of this key pre-requisite for national rejuvenation. A conclusion that is likely to have driven Xi's focus on overhauling the department and its leadership.

Indications of the Chinese leadership's growing concern with the Equipment Development Department first emerged in July 2023 with the announcement of a corruption probe into the department dating back almost six years. It is this investigation, with its focus on the period when Li Shangfu served as the Department's director between 2017 and 2022, that is likely to have brought about the former Defence Minister's demise. Notably, the investigation did not stop with Li's dismissal. In December 2023, state media announced the removal of a further two senior officers, with more expected to follow.

Xi's purges have not been limited to the Rocket Force, Equipment Development Department or even the wider PLA. The announcement in December 2023 of the removal of three senior executives from Chinese military-industrial state owned enterprises highlighted Xi's growing focus on corruption in China's military supply chains. Recognising that embezzlement and corruption are closely linked to the production of military equipment using lower quality materials, manufacturing processes and control standards, Xi has identified corruption within military supply chains as being a key risk to his goal of creating a PLA capable of fighting and winning wars. The result has been the expansion of the current purge beyond those responsible for procuring equipment to include senior figures responsible for the production and development of equipment.

CONCLUSION

Xi's desire to forge an increasingly capable, operationally effective and loyal PLA – over which he maintains absolute control – has been central to the evolution of the PLA over the last decade and continues to define it today. Driven by his desire to ensure the domestic security of the CCP regime and ambition to achieve China's national rejuvenation, these goals have been a core focus for Xi since becoming the CCP's General Secretary. However, the recent purges across the PLA's senior leadership point to Xi's continued frustration with the progress made towards these two strategic objectives. Presented with a PLA that he deems to be insufficiently loyal to ensure the security of the regime and insufficiently capable to realise China's rejuvenation, Xi, now secure in his third term as China's ruler, has unleashed a wave of corruption investigations across the PLA to re-invigorate progress towards these goals. The result has been the most significant shake-up in the PLA's senior leadership for nearly a decade and the beginning of a new phase in China's military evolution.

⁶³Hille and White. *Absolute Loyalty: Xi Jinping turns anti-corruption focus to China's Military*.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵Page. *Command or Control: Xi Jinping is obsessed with loyalty in the PLA*.

⁶⁶Hille and White. *Absolute Loyalty: Xi Jinping turns anti-corruption focus to China's Military*.

⁶⁷Page. *Command or Control: Xi Jinping is obsessed with loyalty in the PLA*.

⁶⁸Glaser and Saunders. *Shakeup in the PLA Rocket Force*.

⁶⁹Page. *Command or Control: Xi Jinping is obsessed with loyalty in the PLA*.

⁷⁰Hille and White. *Absolute Loyalty: Xi Jinping turns anti-corruption focus to China's Military*.

⁷¹Page. *Command or Control: Xi Jinping is obsessed with loyalty in the PLA*.

⁷²Wuthnow. *Why Xi Jinping Doesn't Trust his own Military*.