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The Increasing Insignificance of the Two Sessions

By Arran Hope



Headquarters of the National Development and Reform Commission in Beijing. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Executive Summary:

- The annual “Two Sessions” meetings in Beijing are increasingly insignificant affairs, as the lack of genuine policy announcements and restrictions on delegates reduces the space for consultation and deliberation.
- The government unveiled a new RMB 1 trillion national innovation investment guidance fund, but details are scant and its announcement was relegated to a press conference rather than in a policy document.
- The new fund will be set up “in the near future” and focuses on strategic early stage “hard science and technology” investments, but its prospects for success are unclear given the track record of previous government guidance funds.

On Tuesday, March 11, The “Two Sessions” (两会) wrapped up in Beijing. These are the annual meetings of the National People’s Congress—the unicameral legislature of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that comprises nearly 3,000 delegates from across the country—and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, a political advisory body of a similar size. The headline event is the delivery and approval of the “Government Work Report” (政府工作报告), which summarizes the legislature’s work over the previous year and sets the agenda for the year ahead. The Two Sessions are also an opportunity for a host of other meetings. For instance, President Xi Jinping met with the delegation from Jiangsu Province, various government leaders held press conferences, and groups from different policy constituencies held plenary sessions (Xinhua, [March 7](#), [March 8](#)).

Holes in the Process of Democracy

If this year’s keystone political event was notable for one thing, it was the absence, for the most part, of politics. The Two Sessions have long been characterized in Western media as a vehicle for “rubber stamping” the Chinese Communist Party’s agenda with a show of what the Party terms “whole process democracy” (全过程人民民主). This label has been increasingly apposite in Xi’s so-called new era, leading to a waning in the importance of the Two Sessions. The meetings in Beijing have largely ceased to be a platform for major policy announcements, instead becoming avenues for confirming a pre-agreed trajectory. For instance, in this year’s government work report, Premier Li Qiang (李强) begins laying out economic plans for 2025 by encouraging officials to “comprehensively implement the spirit” (全面贯彻落实党的 ... 三中全会精神) of the Third Plenum last July and to deploy policies in accordance with December’s Central Economic Work Conference ([GWR](#), March 11). In other words, to continue on the course outlined in previous months.

The trend away from genuine consultation or even vaguely democratic processes at the Two Sessions is evident by comparing the 2025 event to previous years. Lasting only six days, this year’s Two Sessions were relatively curtailed. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the standard was around 10 days—and extended to 15 in 2018, when Xi orchestrated the abolition of constitutional term-limits on the president and announced an overhaul of the government bureaucracy ([China Brief](#), March 26, 2018). In another reduction in government transparency, this year’s meetings also took place without a press conference from the premier, cementing a shift that first took place in 2024. Perhaps most chilling this year was the adoption of amendments to the *Law on Deputies* (代表法), which forces deputies to “implement the decision-making and deployment of the CCP Central Committee” (贯彻落实党中央决策部署) and “strengthens the management and supervision of representatives in the performance of their duties” (强化代表履职的管理监督) ([NPC](#), March 12). Tighter control on the conduct and scope of deputies hollows out a channel of effective feedback for the regime, and likely will reduce government efficacy ([Substack/She Said Xi Said](#), March 12).

A Policy Announcement that Wasn’t

The Government Work Report makes clear—as do most high-level economic policy documents from the last year—that the leadership in Beijing is convinced that the country’s fortunes depend in large part on achievements in innovation, in particular in “hard science and technology” (硬科技) ([PRC Government](#) March 6). The report puts particular emphasis on biomanufacturing, quantum technology, embodied artificial

intelligence (AI), and 6G. These sentiments have been reinforced in 2025 with the success around the AI firm DeepSeek. Observers could be forgiven for believing that Xi might have turned the page in his views of the private sector, after he called for the “spirit” (精神) of his February meeting with private entrepreneurs to be studied. This would be a mistake, however—Xi remains committed to enhancing the private sector’s role in supporting national strategic priorities.

At a press conference held by the heads of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Central Securities Regulatory Commission focused on supporting technology innovation, the NDRC’s Zheng Shanjie (郑栅洁) announced a new national innovation investment guidance fund (国家创业投资引导基金) ([NDRC](#), March 6). The fund is expected to total nearly RMB 1 trillion (\$138 billion)—the propaganda messaging calls it as a “carrier-class” (航母级) fund—and focus on longer-term investments of up to 20 years. Targeted ventures will be early stage enterprises in the hard science and technology sectors, with the aim of using “market-oriented methods” (市场化方式) to foster the development of strategic emerging and future industries ([PRC Government](#) March 6; [CCTV](#), March 7).

Despite its official unveiling, it follows policies NDRC announced in December 2024 along with the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission to promote the “high-quality development of the central enterprise venture capital fund” (中央企业创业投资基金高质量发展). These policies encouraged state-owned enterprises to set up venture capital funds that focus on early-stage, small-scale, long-term and core-technology investments—in short, targeting the same enterprises that the new fund is intended support ([Xinhua](#), December 2, 2024; [WeChat/Economic Observer](#), March 7).

The new national innovation investment guidance fund was not explicitly addressed in the NDRC’s report delivered on March 13. The report does refer to efforts to build up the country’s strength in strategic science and technology, provide greater fundamental support for scientific and technological advances, and take systematic steps to develop major scientific and technological infrastructure. It also cites plans to provide long-term, sustained support for basic disciplines and original innovation in frontier areas, and—crucially—to “improve the multi-level system of financial services, boost the development of patient capital, and increase support for venture capital through policy-backed finance” (健全多层次金融服务体系，壮大耐心资本，强化政策性金融对创业投资支持) ([NDRC](#), March 13). But the fund itself is not mentioned. Its actual unveiling apparently was relegated to the press conference, though it did receive a dedicated section in a government explainer, which noted that it would be set up “in the near future” (近期).

Responses have been broadly positive, if judged by venture capitalists quoted in state-run media. For instance, an article for the Securities Times reports that the new fund will improve the PRC’s venture capital markets and positively impact the growth of science and technology enterprises. The managing director of a venture capital firm in Beijing interviewed for the piece calls it a “milestone-style major event” (‘里程碑’式的重大事) ([STCN](#), March 10). The new fund does have potential and could become a success, especially if it attracts more market-oriented funds to participate. It appears to have drawn on lessons from Israel’s national fund as well as Shenzhen’s primary government guidance fund, which is one of the country’s most active investors in hard technology ([163](#), March 9).

There are causes for pessimism, however. One issue is the party-state's poor track record of backing winners. This difficulty is likely to be an acute problem for a fund that, per state news service Xinhua, is not designed for "solely pursuing financial returns" ([Xinhua](#), December 2, 2024). The overarching goal of trying to support innovation in specific, strategic sectors could also limit the likelihood of success. As one article notes, the new fund marks the shift of the PRC's venture capital system "from 'market-led' to 'national strategy-led + market operation,' and is the first time that the central government has systematically intervened in the field of early-stage investment" (从'市场主导'转向"国家战略引领+市场运作"新模式) ([WeChat/Economic Observer](#), March 7). Moreover, research on previous government guidance funds presents a mixed picture. According to an article published in *China Quarterly*, while such funds "promise to provide a powerful jump-start to nascent tech ventures" in principle, in practice they often "fall short of policy goals, and they may even create some unintended problems." The authors go on to note that only 26 per cent of guidance funds analyzed—nearly all of which had invested predominantly in state priority sectors—met their target capital size by 2021, and roughly two thirds of them had not made a single investment ([China Quarterly](#), April 19, 2023).

Conclusion

The announcement of a RMB 1 trillion national innovation investment guidance fund contains a number of indications of the declining importance of the Two Sessions as a venue for serious policy-making. The nature of the announcement itself does little to inspire confidence in the venture. Not only was it not directly announced in the NDRC's report, it also was unveiled with minimal detail and as something that would be established "in the near future." The announcement of similar—if smaller-scale—funds in early December also suggest there is little novelty in the proposed policy. One unwanted effect that the fund could signal is more corruption. The Government Work Report warned that it remains a common problem; corruption cases before both the Supreme Court and Supreme People's Procuratorate shot up over 20 percent and 34 percent, respectively, in 2024; and even national champion Huawei has recently admitted to internal corruption issues ([Caixin](#), March 8; [Economic Observer](#), March 11). The PRC's technological capabilities may be formidable, and the potential for impactful investment is likely large, but there is much about this new policy that suggests it will underwhelm in the final analysis.

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Xi Struggles to Keep Military Construction Reform on Course at Two Sessions

By K. Tristan Tang



Xi speaking at the plenary session of the delegation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Armed Police Force (APF), on March 8. (Source: Xinhua)

Executive Summary:

- Corruption within the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has stymied efforts to deepen coordination in the military-industrial sector and related military equipment departments.
- The substance of Xi Jinping's speech to military delegates at the Two Sessions was similar to his 2019 speech, focusing on issues related to the military-civil fusion and the "integrated national system."
- No previous meeting has featured such a comprehensive list of participants involved exclusively in the military development process. This year's participants also were mostly front-line unit personnel rather than high-ranking officers, suggesting Xi may be suspicious of information provided by the upper echelons of the military.

In early March, the annual “Two Sessions” (两会) meetings took place in Beijing ([2025 Two Sessions](#), accessed March 4). Beyond the headline gatherings of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference are a number of smaller meetings. In the military domain, one of the key events is the plenary meeting of delegations from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the People’s Armed Police (PAP). Since 2013, President Xi Jinping has attended the meeting, listening to representatives’ opinions and suggestions and delivering speeches.

This year, Xi for the first time addressed the July 2023 investigations and dismissals of numerous PLA and defense industry officials for corruption in the procurement of military equipment, disciplinary issues, and other charges ([China Brief](#), September 20, 2023). This coincided with the announcements that several senior PLA deputies were dismissed from their posts and the news that dozens of generals and admirals were absent from the meetings, likely because they too are under investigation. This resulted in a noticeable decrease in the number of PLA attendees ([Financial Times](#), March 1).

According to the press release published after the meeting, Xi proposed enhancing military efficiency, strengthening cross-unit coordination, and improving the management system. These statements align with the concept of the “integrated national strategic system and capabilities” (一体化国家战略体系和能力), also known as the strategy of “military-civil fusion development” (军民融合发展) ([People’s Daily](#), December 13, 2017; PLA Daily, [March 8](#), [March 10](#)). While this is a common topic for Xi’s speeches, the degree of focus it received and the level of urgency with which Xi delivered his message were not ([China Brief](#), April 14, 2023). This suggests that Xi’s efforts to reform the military system still faces stubborn challenges that thus far he has failed to resolve.

2019 Redux: Xi Refocuses on Military Coordination

Since 2013, Xi has led 13 meetings at the Two Sessions with representatives from the PLA and PAP. The themes have generally been positive, as indicated by the press releases from each meeting (see Table 1). The titles of eight of the meetings (2015–2018, 2020, 2022–2024) mention specific policies, including the military-civilian fusion development strategy, innovation-driven development, normalized epidemic prevention and control, law-based governance of the military, integrated national strategic systems and capabilities, and strategic capabilities in emerging fields. Among the five years that did not focus on a particular theme, 2013 was the year Xi was made state president; 2014 came before he had implemented major military policies or responded to disasters; and 2019, 2021, and 2025 marked either the beginning or end of the 13th and 14th Five-Year Plans, as referenced in the press releases’ titles. However, for these latter three, context suggests that the lack of emphasis on specific initiatives may be due to ongoing issues within the PLA at those times—a topic that likely took up a large part of the meetings but that, for obvious reasons, was not declared in the public readouts.

The substance of Xi’s speech in 2025 exhibits a high degree of overlap with his 2019 speech—much more so than with other years. Recurring key terms include “cross-departmental” (跨部门), “cross-disciplinary” (跨领域), “cross-military-civilian” (跨军地), “bottlenecks” (堵点), “funding” (经费), “auditing” (审计), and “corruption” (腐败). These all indicate that Xi wants to prioritize the integration of the military and civilian domains to simultaneously advance military modernization while increasing efficiency and reducing

corruption. The main difference between the two years' speeches is that the rhetoric in 2025 is more urgent, suggesting that problems outlined in 2019 have persisted and are yet to be resolved.

Table 1: News Releases of Xi Jinping's Attendance at the Plenary Meetings of the PLA and the PAP Delegations During Each Two Sessions

Year	Press Release Title	Source
2013	Firmly grasp the Party's strong military goal under the new circumstances, and work to build a people's army that listens to the Party's command, can win battles, and maintains excellent conduct.	(Xinhua , March 11, 2013)
2014	With a spirit of reform and innovation, open up a new situation in national defense and military building, striving to achieve the Party's strong military goal under the new circumstances.	(People's Daily , March 11, 2014)
2015	Deeply implement the military-civilian fusion development strategy, and work to create a new situation for strengthening and revitalizing the military.	(Xinhua , March 12, 2015)
2016	Fully implement the innovation-driven development strategy and push forward national defense and military building to achieve a new leap.	(People's Daily , March 13, 2016)
2017	Accelerate the establishment of a military-civilian integration innovation system to provide strong technological support for the construction of our military.	(People's Daily , March 13, 2017)
2018	Steadily advance the deep development of military-civilian integration, providing strong motivation and strategic support for realizing the Chinese Dream and the strong military dream.	(Xinhua , March 12, 2018)
2019	Successfully implement the "13th Five-Year Plan" for military construction and development, ensuring the timely completion of national defense and military building goals.	(Xinhua , March 12, 2019)
2020	Solidly promote all military work under the premise of normalized epidemic prevention and control, and resolutely achieve the national defense and military building goals for 2020.	(Xinhua , May 26, 2020)
2021	Achieve a good start in national defense and military building during the 14th Five-Year Plan period, and celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China with outstanding achievements.	(Xinhua , March 9, 2021)
2022	Implement the strategy of governing the military by law, improving the level of the rule of law in national defense and military building.	(Xinhua , March 7, 2022)
2023	Unify thought and understanding, strengthen mission responsibility, focus on implementation, and strive to create a new situation in the integrated national strategic system and capability building.	(Xinhua , March 8, 2023)
2024	Strengthen mission responsibility, deepen reform and innovation, and comprehensively improve strategic capabilities in emerging fields.	(Xinhua , March 7, 2024)
2025	Implement high-quality development requirements to successfully complete the "14th Five-Year Plan" for military construction.	(Xinhua , March 7, 2025)

(Source: Compilation by the author based on news reports)

Policy coordination is particularly difficult in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This is in part due to the *tiaokuai* (条块) system, in which authority extends vertically and horizontally at every level of government and each group has its own interests and obligations ([Mertha](#), 2005). Xi's push for an "integrated national strategic system and capabilities" aims to break down these barriers. In the 2019 press release, Xi used all of the terms listed above to emphasize the need for deeper integration and coordination to unblock "chokepoints," and resolve "difficulties" (难点). In the 2025 news release, Xi similarly urged accelerating the

resolution of bottlenecks and obstacles. Improving coordination requires the removal of obstacles, but it also necessitates constructive instruments that can shape a more integrated system. In the 2019 press release, Xi emphasized the need to improve overall coordination and properly manage plans and resources. Six years later, Xi continues to make similar points, this time calling for the use of modern management concepts and methods to help enhance systematization and coherence in the process. He also reiterated the need for cross-departmental, cross-disciplinary, and cross-military-civil coordination to fully streamline planning and execution.

A responsibility system, along with appropriate supervision, is also key to encouraging large-scale, cross-unit, and cross-regional policies. This is especially true given the inefficiencies of the *tiaokuai* system and endemic corruption in the military. The 2019 press release called for a strict system of responsibility for implementing plans and intensified inspection and oversight efforts to resolutely prevent and overcome “formalism and bureaucracy” (形式主义、官僚主义)—bywords for paper-pushing and shirking actual responsibility. Xi also called for holding those found guilty of such behavior accountable and enforcing financial discipline to mitigate misconduct. The 2025 release, mindful of the spate of disciplinary and corruption scandals in the intervening years, exhorts officials to further double down on supervision to root out malpractice and facilitate and promote the execution of plans. This speaks to Xi’s overriding concern regarding corruption: While such malfeasance may indicate a lack of loyalty and attendant loss of power and stability for Xi, the negative impact corruption has on military modernization is at least as big a concern.

Xi also voiced concern about efficiency, a chronic problem for large bureaucracies. In the 2019 press release, Xi stressed the importance of project evaluations but signaled a need to improve the way in which projects are approved. He also mentioned the need for a frugal mindset and to strictly implement the spirit of rules meant to ensure self-discipline, such as the “Eight-point Austerity Rules” (八项规定) and the “Ten Regulations of the Central Military Commission” (军委十项规定) ([MND](#), December 22, 2012; [12371](#), accessed March 11). In the 2025 press release, Xi called for adhering to the principle of building the military with frugality, scientifically allocating national defense resources, and improving the precision of fund usage and cost-effectiveness.

Speakers Include Front-line Personnel in Military Development

The 2025 meeting focused on the entire process of PLA military development (军队建设), in a departure from previous years. It covered resource allocation and usage, military-industrial production, equipment testing, and logistics support. Participants in the meeting possessed relevant backgrounds for each of these areas, as are briefly introduced below:

- **Li Dong (李东)**: The political commissar of the School of System Engineering at the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT). He works in a department primarily responsible for operational planning and task coordination (NUDT, [June 8, 2023](#), [March 15, 2024](#)).
- **Feng Yan (丰艳)**: A representative of the Central Military Commission (CMC) Logistics Support Department. He likely has a background in financial management ([People’s Daily](#), March 9).

- **Liu Shuwei (刘树伟)**: The commander of the PLA Air Force's 95861 Unit, responsible for testing new weapons and developing new combat tactics ([Air Force News](#), March 31, 2021; [WeChat/Jinta County Propaganda Department](#), February 3, 2023).
- **Cui Daohu (崔道虎)**: A sergeant in a Rocket Force brigade that works on frontline defense engineering projects ([China Military Online](#), March 2).
- **Zhou Gang (周刚)**: Chief engineer of the PLA's 63650 Unit, which engages in technical research on special materials and equipment development ([China News](#), June 2, 2021; [NUDT](#), November 18, 2021).
- **Zheng Yuanlin (郑元林)**: Deputy commander of the Air Force. He previously led the unmanned aerial vehicle flight management pilot program in the Shenzhen area as chief of staff of the Southern Theater Command Air Force in 2018. He has relevant experience in using emerging resources and advancing military-civil fusion ([Civil Aviation Administration of China](#), July 28, 2021; [PLA Daily](#), March 10).

No previous meeting has featured such a comprehensive list of participants involved in the military development process. For example, although the 2017 meeting readout had the highest number of mentions of “military-civil fusion” (军民融合) and “technology” (科技) of any year, only four out of nine speakers had backgrounds related to the military-industrial sector or national defense technology. These included Li Yanming (厉延明), political commissar of the Navy Equipment Department; Tang Hong (唐宏), a professor at Air Force Engineering University; Li Xianyu (李贤玉), the director of a research institute at the Rocket Force Equipment Research Academy; and Zhang Yulin (张育林), deputy director of the CMC Equipment Development Department ([PLA Daily](#), March 11, 2018; China Military Online, [March 9, 2016](#), [March 14, 2017](#); [Kunming Institute of Botany of Chinese Academy of Sciences](#), September 27, 2017). These four speakers all represented the technology development and equipment sectors—a small portion of the military development process.

Military development similarly was on the agenda in 2019, though still to a lesser extent than in 2025. At that meeting, officials related to military development included Wang Huiqing (王辉青), director of the CMC Strategic Planning Office; Zhu Cheng (朱程), director of the Air Force Equipment Department; Li Jun (李军), chief of staff of the Rocket Force; and Zhang Yihu (张义瑚), deputy commander of the Central Theater Command (People's Daily, [March 12, 2018](#), March 13, 2019 [\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#); PLA Daily, [March 12, 2018](#), [March 12, 2019](#); [China Daily](#), May 16, 2019). Although these officials were involved in military development, equipment demand planning and management, branch development, and theater readiness planning, they were primarily concerned with the planning process.

Another difference with the personnel invited to speak at this year's meeting was their military grades. In 2019, all speakers were high-ranking officials at the CMC, military branches, and theater commands, whereas in 2025 most of them were front-line unit personnel. This shift suggests that Xi may be suspicious of information provided by the upper echelons of the military. This may be because previous information has been incomplete or biased—a speculative interpretation, but one that accords with analysis Xi has become less trusting of information submitted to him by those at the top of the military ([Foreign Affairs](#), September 26,

2023). Through bypassing those officials and listening to the opinions of those who are directly involved in or responsible for military development, Xi perhaps hopes to acquire a more accurate sense of where things stand.

Conclusion

Intractable problems in the PRC system tend to be caused by stubborn vested interests and protectionism. This appears to be the case for the military-industrial sector and related military equipment departments, and would explain Xi's difficulties in implementing his desired reforms (The Diplomat, [September 12, 2024](#), [November 5, 2024](#)). In 2025, Xi has sought to tackle the problem head on by engaging in a comprehensive review of the issues in national defense and military development rather than focusing solely on specific aspects. He has coupled this with purges of PLA generals and senior officials in the military-industrial sector.

Xi's reforms will not necessarily be more successful than those announced in 2019. At the Two Sessions meeting in 2023, Xi also declared the need to promote the development of the "integrated national strategic system and capabilities." However, within a few months numerous PLA generals and senior officials in the military-industrial sector were investigated or removed from their positions. Even the representative of the CMC Equipment Development Department, Rao Wenmin (饶文敏), who had spoken at the meeting in 2023, had his status as a People's Congress deputy revoked ([Xinhua](#), March 8, 2023; [People's Daily](#), December 29, 2023). The crucial question in 2025 is whether Xi has been able to break entrenched practices and networks within the PLA and the military-industrial sector. If not, barriers to improving coordination, military-civil fusion, and efficiency are likely to persist, as is the ongoing anti-corruption drive.

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Fujian Unveils Incentives for Militia Training for a Cross-Strait Campaign

By Ryan D. Martinson



Military-themed mural in Fujian Province. (Source: Pingtan Times)

Executive Summary:

- Fujian Province's new "Measures for Guaranteeing Militia Rights and Interests" aim to incentivize maximum readiness for forces who likely will be key in any campaign against Taiwan.
- The measures provide financial support and other perks in an attempt to motivate troops and promote the professionalization of the militia.
- The measures do not signal that the PRC will go to war tomorrow, and so far Fujian is the only province to have issued such measures.

If the People's Republic of China (PRC) decides to attack Taiwan, it will need to leverage the capabilities of all of its armed forces. This not only includes the land, sea, air, and rocket forces of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) or the relevant units of the People's Armed Police, such as the China Coast Guard. It also includes the third component of the country's armed forces—its militia.

The PRC's militia comprises part-time soldiers who, aside from their military duties, typically hold jobs in civilian industries. As members of the militia, they can be mobilized to conduct military operations in both war and peace. Militia members belong to units that are managed by local PLA entities called People's Armed Forces Departments (人民武装部). Individual militia units often specialize in a skill that is valuable to the PLA, such as cyber warfare or equipment repair.

Ensuring the competence of militia forces has always been a challenge. Militia members do not receive adequate compensation for their work, causing malaise and apathy on the training field and, ultimately, poor performance on the battlefield. This presents a serious risk for Beijing, which may need to rely on its militia forces in the event of a major conflict. In January 2025, Fujian Province, the province opposite Taiwan, took a significant step toward professionalizing its militia units by issuing a document called "Measures for Guaranteeing Militia Rights and Interests" (福建省民兵权益保障办法) ([Fujian Government](#), January 26). If faithfully implemented, it could help ensure that Fujian militia show up for a cross-strait campaign both willing and able to do their duty.

The Wartime Roles of Fujian's Militia Forces

Fujian militia forces would likely play a significant role in a military assault on Taiwan. The two main campaign scenarios involve either an amphibious invasion across the Taiwan Strait or a blockade of seaborne access to and from the island. Given the centrality of the maritime domain in both campaigns, the PRC would seek to leverage those militia units best positioned to support naval operations in this theater, namely, Fujian province's "maritime militia" (海上民兵). The vast majority of these militia units comprise men who work in the fishing industry and, when mobilized, operate from large, steel-hulled fishing boats ([Andrew Erickson](#), October 5, 2024; [The Diplomat](#), December 24, 2024).

In a cross-strait conflict, Fujian's maritime militia forces could be tasked to perform any number of missions. These could include transporting troops and materiel across the Taiwan Strait to support a seizure or occupation; embarking PLA special operations forces for clandestine raids on Taiwanese shipping or targets ashore; or rescuing downed PLA pilots or ship-wrecked Chinese sailors in waters off Taiwan. Alternatively, they could be ordered to sail together with larger Chinese vessels to confound enemy targeting, risking their expendable fishing boats to protect high-value platforms like destroyers, troop transports, or amphibious landing craft. They also might be arrayed around Taiwan to report on enemy movements or the outcome of some PLA operation, or they could participate in blockade enforcement—boarding, inspecting, and taking control of noncompliant vessels—alongside the China Coast Guard and the PLA Navy. They might even be tasked with laying sea mines or, if circumstances dictated, sweeping them. [1]

Fujian's Financial Incentives Seek to Motivate Militia Forces

All of these missions are extremely difficult and dangerous, and they would test the mettle of the country's best-trained active-duty soldiers, let alone a part-time force like the maritime militia. To make matters worse, members of the maritime militia only muster for training during a few months each year when the national fishing moratorium keeps them shoreside. As a result, the little training they receive must be intense and focused. However, this has not been the case. Existing policies have generally failed to incentivize militia members to commit to the arduous training needed to perfect their skills. The chief problem has been poor compensation. According to one authoritative report from 2016, the standards for training allowances (训练补助) are lower than the costs of participation, forcing militia members to absorb the difference. Predictably, this meant that “militia enthusiasm for training is not high” (民兵参训热情不高) ([China National Defense News](#), April 20, 2016).

Over the past decade, PLA experts have repeatedly advocated for reforms to national and local policy to ensure that militia members are properly remunerated for their work. For example, in 2018, Senior Colonel Fang Shouxiang (方寿祥), head of the Strategic Construction Department of the Zhejiang Military District, called for the PRC to create economic compensation mechanisms for members of the maritime militia, providing them with rewards for training, stipends for work missed due to training and operations, living allowances, and special compensation for injury or death while on duty. [2] Others have issued similar recommendations. [3] Until now, these appear to have fallen on deaf ears.

On January 26, 2025, the Fujian provincial government and the Fujian military district jointly issued a document titled “Measures for Guaranteeing Militia Rights and Interests” (福建省民兵权益保障办法). This appears to be the first major effort to address significant impediments to professionalizing the militia ([Fujian Government](#), January 26). The new measures, which reflect the Central Military Commission's desire to “strengthen national defense mobilization and reserve force construction” (加强国防动员和后备力量建设), focus on bolstering militia members' “sense of honor, sense of gain, and sense of responsibility” (荣誉感、获得感和责任感). According to one official interpretation, they seek to “inspire motivation for militia work” (激发民兵工作内生动力) ([Fujian Government](#), January 27). The measures do this by guaranteeing that individual members receive appropriate rewards—monetary or other benefits—for their service and mitigating the negative impacts of militia service on militia members and their families.

The document contains the following provisions, which apply to all militia members in the province:

- It incentivizes militia members to train hard by promising them “monetary rewards” (奖金奖品) for achievements in province-wide and local “military skills competitions” (比武竞赛).
- It incentivizes high performance in the conduct of “diversified military tasks” (多样化军事任务)—which include “maritime sovereignty enforcement patrols” (海上维权), drills, exercises, and training activities, among others—by offering militia members or their children preference for enlisting in the PLA.
- The measures seek to offset the risks inherent in military operations by requiring relevant organizations to purchase accidental injury insurance (意外伤害保险) for militia members.

- They also seek to reduce the financial risk of belonging to the militia by compelling employers to continue issuing salaries and other benefits to militia members who have been mobilized for training or operations and prohibiting them from terminating their employment as a result of duty.
- The document provides that militia members hurt or killed while on duty receive pensions and preferential treatment.
- The measures guarantee that militia members who conduct diversified military tasks, carry out emergency response, or engage in wartime tasks receive training and duty subsidies.
- They require local governments to provide support and aid for militia members whose families are facing difficult financial circumstances.

The measures also place special emphasis on rewarding the province's most elite militia members, called "primary militia" (基干民兵). [4] Most members of the maritime militia—and all those that would be entrusted with wartime missions—fall within this category. Each member receives a Fujian militia credential (福建省民兵证) that entitles them to additional benefits. Presenting their militia cards gives them priority when carrying out business at government offices, preferential treatment at state-owned banks (which comprise the bulk of the PRC banking system), eligibility for special services at public hospitals and clinics, and even employment assistance for those seeking civilian work. Additional benefits for those with militia cards include paying reduced prices or gaining free admittance to state-funded museums, art galleries, parks, expos, historical sites, and scenic spots. The measures stipulate that primary militia members receive prioritized legal support services. Furthermore, the document urges banks and other institutions to create financial products and services for primary militia members and offer them low-interest loans.

One Small Step Toward Military Readiness

The issuing of the "Measures for Guaranteeing Militia Rights and Interests" in Fujian Province is one small indicator that the PRC is taking steps to resolve problems that must be resolved if it is to prosecute a military attack against Taiwan successfully. This does not mean that Beijing is going to war tomorrow. Fujian is the first and only province to have issued such measures publicly. This is probably no coincidence, as Fujian militia forces would likely play a critical role in any major cross-strait conflict. In particular, the province's specialized maritime militia units could be tasked with a wide range of front-line missions, including reconnaissance, search and rescue, transport, blockade enforcement, deception, and mine warfare.

If Fujian's maritime militia forces are to acquit themselves well, individual militia members must be properly motivated to join the force, complete onerous training requirements, and answer the call in the event of a conflict. The province's new measures represent an earnest effort to create the necessary incentive structures for maximum readiness. The document seeks to relieve fears of financial risk for militia members and their families and guarantees them a large set of perks for participating in the militia and doing their jobs well. It reserves the best rewards for members of elite militia units, such as those that would be expected to support a major campaign against Taiwan. Assuming the measures are fully implemented, they could translate into a better-trained and motivated militia prepared to serve as a force multiplier in any campaign to invade, coerce, or subdue Taiwan.

Beyond Fujian's maritime militia, its land-based militia units could also play important roles in a cross-strait contingency. They, too, will benefit from the measures. Consider the city of Ningde, for example. While it does possess a number of maritime militia units, in recent years it has also funded the development of “new type” (新型) militia forces to include units specialized in “cyber attack and defense, electromagnetic spectrum control, electronic warfare, meteorological and hydrographic [support], and high-tech equipment repair” (网络攻防、频谱管控、电子对抗、气象水文、高新装备维修) ([Ningde City](#), February 14, 2016). Most if not all of these units could see service in the event of a high-end conflict over Taiwan, and their performance will ultimately contribute to the PRC's success, or failure.

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Notes

[1] 全军后勤学术研究中心 [Military Logistics Academic Research Center], 作战后勤保障 [Operational Logistics Support] (Beijing: Military Logistics Academic Research Center, February 2017) p. 184; 刘自力, 陈青松[Lui Zili and Chen Qingsong], 海上民兵参加海战的任务与行动[“Tasks and Operations of the Maritime Militia When Participating in Maritime Combat”], 国防[National Defense], no. 11 (November 2018), pp. 50–51.

[2] 方寿祥 [Fang Shouxiang], 以改革创新精神推动新时代海上民兵训练深化发展 [“Promote the Deep Development of Maritime Militia Training in the New Era with the Spirit of Reform and Innovation”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 6 (June 2018), p. 58.

[3] See, for instance, 姚淮宁 [Yao Huaining], 着眼形势任务 遵循特点规律 积极探索海上民兵侦察情报建设新模式 [“Focus on the Situation and the Mission, Follow the Characteristics and the Pattern, and Actively Explore a New Model of Maritime Militia Reconnaissance and Intelligence Construction”], 国防 [National Defense], no. 1 (January 2018), p. 47.

[4] The PLA Dictionary of Military Terms translates 骨干民兵 as “primary militia,” defining them as the “backbone members” (骨干成员) of militia forces. Within their ranks are former active-duty soldiers, individuals who have completed military training, and/or individuals who possess special technical expertise. Those who are not “primary militia” are considered “ordinary militia” (普通民兵). 中国人民解放军军语 [PLA Dictionary of Military Terms] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, September 2011), p. 32.

PRC Uses Legal Warfare to Support Maritime Blockade Against Taiwan

By Masayoshi Dobashi and Rena Sasaki



A China Coast Guard ship sails close to a Coast Guard Administration vessel near the median line of the Taiwan Strait in July. (Source: Coast Guard Administration)

Executive Summary:

- Creative legal strategies have been deployed in recent years to support a justification for a blockade around Taiwan.
- International law contains the concept of a “long-distance blockade” and the “continuous voyage doctrine” that could both be invoked to restrict access to Taiwan by the international community in the event of a blockade.
- Domestic laws such as the *China Coast Guard Law* and the *Maritime Traffic Safety Law* reinforce the foundation for a blockade by empowering the China Coast Guard and People’s Liberation Army Navy to intercept, detain, and regulate foreign vessels in contested waters.
- A de facto or de jure blockade of any length would significantly impact Taiwan, which is heavily reliant on imports. Beijing may frame such an act as economic coercion rather than military aggression to avoid backlash and delay an international response.

On February 26, Taiwan's Ministry of Defense reported that People's Liberation Army (PLA) fighters and warships had set up a zone 40 miles from the island's southwestern coast to conduct "live-fire drills" (射击训练) without providing customary notification ([Military News Agency](#), February 26). The following day, a spokesperson for the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Ministry of National Defense rebuffed this as "pure hype" (纯属炒作) but did not comment on the substance of Taiwan's reports ([MND](#), February 27). Part of the reason for the alarm was that it followed on the heels of a live-fire drill conducted by a PLA Navy task force in the Tasman Sea, for which the PLA also did not provide appropriate warning ([China Brief](#), March 11). Both instances were legal under international law but constituted unusual and aggressive actions by the PRC. Military pressure on Taiwan has been acute in recent years. In the last twelve months, the PLA conducted "Joint Sword" exercises in May and October and an unprecedented large-scale winter naval training in December (China Brief, [July 26, 2024](#), [November 1, 2024](#), [December 20, 2024](#)). These simulated aspects of a blockade suggest that this could be Beijing's preferred course of action in an operation against Taiwan.

The legal implications of a "Taiwan blockade" are currently under-defined. One text that sheds light on potential legal justifications for a blockade is a chapter in the 2020 publication *Research on Key Operational Models in the Law of Maritime Military Actions* (海上军事行动法部分重要行动样式研究), co-authored by Han Xiaofeng (韩晓峰) and Shao Jingjing (邵晶晶), researchers at the PLA's National Defense University. [1] The chapter focuses on a "sea blockade operation" (海上封锁行动), detailing several ways in which the PRC might attempt to deploy and justify a blockade while mitigating international responses. Since the book was published, the PRC has enacted several domestic laws and regulations that lay the groundwork to permit such a course of action.

International Law With Chinese Characteristics

Two approaches to maritime blockades form the legal and operational foundation of the PRC's evolving approach to maritime control around Taiwan, according to Han and Shao. These are the "long-distance blockade" (远程封锁) and the "continuous voyage doctrine" (连续航程理论). The first, also known as a "distant blockade," involves intercepting enemy maritime trade at extended ranges, often beyond the vicinity of the adversary's coastline. Britain imposed long-distance blockades against Germany in both world wars. [2] There is no clear international legal standard defining the operational range of a blockade. Instead, effectiveness is judged by the capacity to deny access to enemy ports. For instance, a blockade reaching 1,000 nautical miles—approximately the distance from Taipei to Beijing—could still be permissible under one interpretation of international law, provided the PRC could effectively enforce it. Beijing thus could escalate blockade measures and extend their scope as it sees fit. By gradually tightening blockade measures, Beijing could restrict Taiwan's trade flows as a form of economic coercion without immediately triggering an armed response. In this way, the legal ambiguity provides space for the PRC to push the bounds of the law, for instance to justify deploying PLA Navy and China Coast Guard vessels to disrupt Taiwan-bound shipping.

The continuous voyage doctrine is a principle of international law that allows the seizure of goods, including contraband (i.e. military goods), if there is a clear intent to transport them to an enemy state. Initially rejected by many states, the doctrine gained acceptance after World War II as countries refrained from challenging its application in international customary law. It was applied during the two world wars and the blockade of the

Gaza Strip, setting a precedent for broad enforcement. [3] If the PRC were to invoke it against Taiwan, neutral vessels transporting goods to Taipei or Taiwan-controlled islands could be intercepted and searched, including in international waters. Unlike a traditional blockade, which is geographically constrained, enforcement of the doctrine would allow the PRC to interdict shipments globally.

Restrictions Short of a Blockade

Under the law of war, the legality of a maritime blockade is contingent on the existence of an international armed conflict. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea designates the Taiwan Strait as international waters. Under this designation, a blockade of Taiwan could be legitimate in the event of an armed conflict. However, Beijing's long-standing political position is that all Taiwan-related matters are the PRC's internal affairs. Under this view—which runs counter to international law—a military operation over Taiwan would be classed as a non-international armed conflict. As such, a blockade beyond the PRC's territorial waters lacks a clear basis in international law. Some scholars argue that principles governing blockades can be extended to non-international conflicts if they align with international humanitarian law (IHL). However, this remains a legally contentious position and it is unclear how Beijing might seek to make such a justification. [4] Given these constraints, the PRC may pursue one of two alternative strategies to restrict Taiwan's maritime access without formally declaring a blockade.

One approach would be to designate zones under security-related pretexts without explicitly instigating a blockade. This has a precedent in the *Guanbi* (关闭; closed port) Policy employed by the Republic of China in 1949 during the civil war, which involved laying mines and restricting shipping routes along China's coastline to disrupt Communist-controlled ports. Beijing could employ similar methods against Taiwan to achieve a comparable effect without formally declaring a blockade. Another tactic could be designing maritime danger zones, citing safety concerns related to military exercises. Although these zones may not carry the same legal weight as a declared blockade, the PRC could still use them to pressure foreign commercial and military vessels to avoid certain shipping routes. This tactic has been used previously, including during the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the 2022 live-fire exercises following then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. The two instances in the Tasman Sea and southwest of Taiwan in late February this year could signal that Beijing favors this tactic.

A second approach could be pursued if the United States or other actors intervene militarily in a Taiwan conflict. In this scenario, the PRC could invoke individual or collective self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter to justify a more forceful maritime interdiction strategy. The PRC might then establish a maritime exclusion zone or total exclusion zone around Taiwan, restricting access to certain areas under the guise of preventing foreign interference. [5] Within such a zone, PLA or China Coast Guard ships could interfere with other ships' communications and capture or even attack vessels that failed to comply with instructions. [6] This approach aligns with the PRC's broader legal position of interpreting international law in ways that advance its objectives while maintaining plausible deniability against accusations that it is instigating a conflict ([Japan-Taiwan Exchange Foundation](#), May 2023).

New Laws Legitimize Blockade Operations

Since the publication of Han and Shao's book, the PRC has passed laws and created regulations to create a legal basis for imposing maritime control around Taiwan.

The *China Coast Guard Law* (海警法), which came into effect on February 1, 2021, formalizes the duties and powers of the coast guard, granting it robust enforcement authority in “maritime areas under PRC jurisdiction” (中华人民共和国管辖海域) without defining the extent of those areas ([MFA](#), January 22, 2021). [7] The law also authorizes the China Coast Guard to “take all necessary measures, including the use of weapons” (采取包括使用武器) against perceived infringements of PRC sovereignty or jurisdiction and to expel foreign vessels from waters the PRC claims. If a foreign military or government ship enters waters the PRC considers its own and refuses to comply with PRC demands, the law permits measures up to the removal of that ship by force. Additionally, the coast guard may establish “temporary maritime security zones” (海上临时警戒区) in which ships and personnel can be restricted or prohibited from entering and requisitioning civilian assets in emergencies. These zones can be established outside of wartime and under broad pretexts. Xinhua, the PRC's state news service, describes the law as a “powerful legal guarantee” (有力法律保障) for the coast guard “to safeguard national sovereignty, security, and maritime rights and interests” (维护国家主权、安全和海洋权益). In PRC discourse, the law is framed as closing gaps in maritime “rights protection” (维权) enforcement, effectively weaponizing law enforcement to serve national security goals ([Xinhua](#), January 23, 2021)

The *Regulations on Administrative Law Enforcement Procedures for Coast Guard Agencies* (海警机构行政执法程序规定), which came into effect on June 2024, supplements the *Coast Guard Law* ([CCG](#), June 15, 2024). It empowers the coast guard to detain foreign vessels and persons for up to 60 days and to implement temporary maritime “warning zones” (警戒区) for military purposes. This further expands the coast guard's ability to prevent violations of the PRC's sovereignty and jurisdiction and to enhance its law enforcement capabilities ([China Brief](#), June 21).

In September 2021, the PRC's legislature adopted a sweeping revision of the 1983 *Maritime Traffic Safety Law* (海上交通安全法) ([Xinhua](#), April 30, 2021). The amended law greatly expands the PRC's authority over foreign vessels in and near its waters. It applies to “sea areas under the jurisdiction of the PRC” (中华人民共和国管辖海域) without clearly defining them. Article 54 compels certain foreign ships to notify PRC maritime authorities upon entering its territorial waters. The revised law also affirms the PRC's authority to alter or suspend maritime traffic in areas it designates for security or military purposes. The PRC can also strictly control activities in these waters by specifying the types of foreign ships that must provide information when navigating and anchoring in “pilotage zones” (引航区)—specific geographical areas where the safe and efficient navigation of vessels requires the assistance of a qualified pilot. ([Indo-Pacific Defense Forum](#), March 21, 2022). Although authorities generally establish pilotage zones in ports, bays, and inland seas that receive a high volume of foreign maritime traffic, the PRC can, under this law, define a pilotage zone as a disputed area, even if it is within another country's exclusive economic zone. The law raises penalties for violations, including fines and detentions of vessels. While it is unclear that aspects of this law accord with

international law, the threat of punishment by the PRC that it entails bolsters the credibility of a potential blockade by warning ship owners and insurers that attempting to breach a PRC-declared blockade could have negative legal consequences.

In addition to the above maritime-focused regulations, the PRC has updated broader defense legislation that also could be used to facilitate a blockade. A revised *National Defense Law* that took effect in January 2021 grants the Central Military Commission the power to “safeguard ... developmental interests” (保卫 ... 发展利益) and oppose secession ([MND](#), December 27, 2020; [China Brief](#), February 26, 2021). This enables the military’s top leadership to initiate operations not only for immediate defense but also for protecting national unity and other interests ([Indo-Pacific Defense Forum](#), January 28, 2021). The *Outline on Military Operations Other Than War* (军队非战争军事行动纲要 (试行)), which Xi Jinping signed in 2022, provides guidelines for the PLA to undertake missions that can strengthen the testing of PLA combat capabilities, enhance the PLA’s implementation of gray zone operations, and expand the role of the military’s operation ([Xinhua](#), June 13, 2022; [INDSR](#), June 23, 2022). This has led to speculation that Beijing could frame an action targeting Taiwan as a “special military operation” and deploy domestic law to assert the legitimacy of its actions, just as Russia has done in Ukraine.

Conclusion

Beijing has spent the last several years constructing a domestic legal toolkit that will allow it to claim a blockade against Taiwan as legitimate or reinforce the foundation for a blockade by empowering the China Coast Guard and PLA Navy to intercept, detain, and regulate foreign vessels in contested waters. As PLA-affiliated researchers laid out in 2020, avenues for justifying such actions under international law also have been explored. As a formal blockade would implicitly recognize Taiwan as a belligerent, contradicting the PRC’s “One China Principle” (一个中国原则), Beijing may seek an alternative. These could include establishing exclusion zones or maritime danger zones. In the event of U.S. intervention, Beijing could also invoke self-defense to establish a maritime exclusion zone or a total exclusion zone.

A de facto or de jure blockade of any length would significantly impact Taiwan, which is heavily reliant on imports. Beijing may frame such an act as economic coercion rather than military aggression to avoid backlash and delay an international response. Upholding international law, protecting open shipping lanes for regional states whose goods are shipped through the Taiwan Strait, and preserving peace are in the interests of all nations. However, concerted efforts will be required to push back against the PRC’s increasing legal warfare as it attempts to achieve the “unstoppable historical trend of national unification” (谁也不能阻挡祖国统一的历史大势) ([MFA](#), December 31, 2024).

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Notes

[1] Han Xiaofeng 韩晓峰 and Shao Jingjing 邵晶晶. *Haishang junshi xingdong fa bufen zhongyao xingdong yangshi yanjiu*. 海上军事行动法部分重要行动样式研究 [Research on Key Operational Models in the Law of Maritime Military Actions]. Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe, 2020.

[2] Michael G. Fraunces, “The International Law of Blockade: New Guiding Principles in Contemporary State Practice,” *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol.101, 1992, p.900–901.

[3] Phillip Drew, *The Law of Maritime Blockade: Past, Present, and Future*, Oxford University Press, 2017, p.56, 79–80.

[4] Liu Ranran and Fan Chen, “A study on the legal protection of maritime blockade operations in high-end naval warfare” [高端海战中海上封锁作战法律保障问题研究], *Defence Industry Conversion in China* [中国军转民], 2024(17):3 5-37., and Zhu Lijian, “*Haishang fengsuo guojifa zhong de liyi pingheng: Chuantong, dangdai yu tiaozhan*” 海上封锁国际法中的利益平衡：传统、当代与挑战 [The balance of interests in international law of maritime blockade: tradition, contemporary issues, and challenges], *Journal of Shenzhen University (Humanities & Social Sciences)*, Vol.38 No.6, November 2021.

[5] A maritime exclusion zone is a designated area at sea established by a belligerent nation during armed conflicts to control or prohibit access to foreign ships and aircraft. Unlike traditional blockades, which involve close deployment near enemy ports to prevent ingress and egress, these zones cover extended areas where offending vessels can be subject to attack rather than confiscation. A total exclusion zone is a more stringent form of exclusion zone wherein any vessel or aircraft, regardless of its national affiliation, entering the designated area may be subject to attack without prior warning. The United Kingdom instituted such a zone during the Falklands War, designating all vessels and aircraft that entered within 200 nautical miles of the Falkland Islands, including those of neutral countries, as targets without warning. See *British Year Book of International Law*, Vol.53, 1982, 539 and 541–542.

[6] *San Remo Manual on International Law Applicable to Armed Conflicts at Sea*, International Institute of Humanitarian Law, June 12, 1994. §108.

[7] Although there is no specific definition of the relevant sea areas, according to the PRC’s Supreme People’s Court, “the internal waters, territorial seas, contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones, continental shelves and other sea areas under the jurisdiction of the People’s Republic of China.” The draft of the *Coast Guard Law* initially had a similar provision that was deleted from the final text (see [Japan Ministry of Defense](#), March 16, 2021; [CSIS](#), June 7, 2023).

PLA Factions and the Erosion of Xi's Power Over the Military

By Brandon Tran and Gerui Zhang



Xi attending a gala held by the CMC for retired military officers of Beijing-based, Jan. 29, 2024. (Source: Xinhua)

Executive Summary:

- Two waves of recent purges in the People's Liberation Army have focused on Xi Jinping's two major bases of support, the Shaanxi Gang and the Fujian Clique, likely eroding his power over the military.
- A series of articles in the *PLA Daily* in late 2024 written by people aligned with Central Military Commission Vice Chair Zhang Youxia advocate for collective leadership and more internal democratic decision-making, in a rebuke to Xi's call for centralized and unified leadership.
- Xi likely does not face any genuine rival, but internal power struggles nevertheless remain fierce.

A year-long anti-corruption campaign has purged major senior personnel from the ranks of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). While graft is endemic to the Chinese military, purges in Leninist regimes also serve a political purpose. Fierce internal power struggles are another feature of such regimes, with control over the military seen as vital to consolidating power. In the Chinese military system, Xi Jinping is not the only person who has power over personnel. Recently, some observers have suggested that his vice chair on the Central Military Commission (CMC), Zhang Youxia (张又侠), may have ordered recent purges in the PLA Navy. If this is true, it could suggest that Xi Jinping's traditional bases of support in the PLA are weakened and that his authority over the PLA is far from absolute ([People's Report](#), October 11, 2024; [X/@yanmingshipping](#), November 28, 2024).

Two Purges Have Targeted Two Xi Factions

The current CMC consists of five men besides Xi, according to the Ministry of National Defense website. These individuals are pulled from Xi's two major bases of support in the PLA, the Shaanxi Gang (陕西帮) and the Fujian Clique (福建系). The former stems from Xi's family connections as a princeling—both Zhang Youxia and Zhang Shengmin (张升民) hail from Shaanxi Province. Zhang Youxia also has close familial ties to Xi, as the two men's fathers served in the same unit during the civil war. The latter group is composed of He Weidong (何卫东) and Miao Hua (苗华), who worked with Xi when he was an official in Fujian Province. This leaves Liu Zhenli (刘振立), who is more aligned with the Shaanxi Gang by virtue of his relationship with Zhang Youxia, under whom he served during the Sino-Vietnamese War ([VOA Chinese](#), October 24, 2022; [MND](#), accessed March 3). [1]

The current anti-graft campaign in the PLA can be divided into two distinct waves, the first beginning in 2023 and ending in mid-2024, and the second beginning in November 2024 and continuing to the present. Officials connected to the Shaanxi Gang and the Fujian Clique, respectively, were caught up in these two waves, likely resulting in an erosion of Xi Jinping's base of support.

The first wave primarily targeted the PLA's aerospace apparatus, eliminating key leaders in the PLA Rocket Force, Air Force, Strategic Support Force, and the aerospace industry. Those who were purged often had ties to Shaanxi Gang leaders via superior-subordinate relationships. This wave centered around Defense Minister Li Shangfu (李尚福) and his predecessor Wei Fenghe (魏凤和). The probes traced Li's misconduct to the Equipment Development Department, where he succeeded Zhang Youxia as director. In December 2023, the National People's Congress announced the removal of nine senior military officials. Of these, five were associates of Li in the Rocket Force, and two, Zhang Yulin (张育林) and Rao Wenmin (饶文敏), were officials in the Equipment Development Department ([Xinhua](#), December 29, 2023). They likely had a hand in the misconduct that also ensnared Li (Lianhe Zaobao, [July 29, 2023](#), [December 29, 2023](#)). While Zhang Youxia himself was not implicated, the removal of his former subordinates damaged the standing of the Shaanxi Gang. Li was replaced by a member of the Fujian Clique, Dong Jun (董军), confounding months of speculation that he would be succeeded by the more closely aligned Liu Zhenli ([Lianhe Zaobao](#), October 12, 2023; [Radio Free Asia](#), November 24, 2023). This suggests that factional interests were at play in the personnel reshuffle.

Following a brief hiatus, the purges ramped up again in November 2024 with rumors that Dong Jun was under investigation and the announcement that Miao Hua was suspended. The PLA Navy became the principal focus of investigations, with suggestions that Miao was the patron of all those under scrutiny ([China Military Online](#), November 28, 2024; [National People's Congress](#), December 25, 2024). [2] The Fujian Clique, the beneficiary of the previous round of purges, now finds itself in the probes' crosshairs. Speculation abounds that Zhang Youxia is flexing his political muscle following the downfall of his supporters. This is supported by a series of meetings Zhang hosted with senior PLA officers in late 2024, from which Xi was conspicuously absent (MND, [September 13, 2024](#), [October 22, 2024](#); [China Brief](#), December 3). Even if this analysis is correct, however, it remains unclear what Zhang's motives might be.

Whose Authority? Xi Versus the System

Party literature hints at this unfolding PLA power struggle. In December 2024, Xi penned an article in the Party's theory journal *Qiushi*, emphasizing that the first step of revolution is to “adhere to the centralized and unified leadership of the Party Central Committee as the fundamental guarantee” (以坚持党中央集中统一领导为根本保证) ([Qiushi](#), December 16, 2024). By contrast, other parts of the PLA leadership have been advocating for collective decision-making. In other words, control should remain within the Party but not under a particular apparatus (such as the central committee) that Xi directly controls.

Several commentaries published in 2024 in the *PLA Daily* newspaper stressed the importance of “adhering to collective leadership” (坚持集体领导) and maintaining “democratic centralism” (民主集中制). These include an article from July and a series of five further pieces published in September and December (*PLA Daily*, [July 9, 2024](#), [September 13, 2024](#); [December 9, 2024](#), [December 11, 2024](#), [December 16, 2024](#), [December 18, 2024](#)). A majority of the authors can be traced back to organizations Zhang Youxia's faction previously had ties to, including three connected to the Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF) and one from the Aerospace Force. [3]

The article from July emphasizes collective leadership under “each level of party organization” (各级党组织). It states that “only if secretaries and deputy secretaries adhere to collective leadership and focus on developing democracy will they extract the correct views on how to conform to the laws of development and to the basic interests of the masses and create scientific policy” (书记、副书记只有坚持集体领导，注重发扬民主，才能把符合事物发展规律、符合广大人民群众根本利益的正确意见提炼出来，作出科学决策). It goes on to discuss the need for “multiple voices” (多种声音) in any debate, saying that this is the basis for adhering to collective leadership and scientific decision-making, especially during the current phase of military modernization where such decision-making is becoming increasingly complex.

The September 13 piece is the first in a five-part series and is titled “Consciously Set an Example of Upholding Democratic Centralism” (自觉做坚持民主集中制的表率)—a phrase that also serves as the subtitle of the subsequent articles. The main titles of the other four articles all take the form of exhorting readers to “Take the Lead and ...” (带头 ...), which is followed by “Uphold Collective Leadership” (坚持集体领导), “Develop Democracy Within the Party” (发扬党内民主), “Protect Group Unity (维护班子团结),

and “Seek Reality, Deal With Reality, and Implement Based on Reality” (求实务实落实), respectively. Several themes emerge across these pieces.

First, the articles often emphasize the importance of the “democratic” side of the “democratic centralism” equation. One article writes, “in a system of democratic centralism, first comes democracy, then comes centralism” (民主集中制, 先有民主, 后有集), while another similarly argues that “democracy comes first and then centralism” (先民主后集中). A third notes that intra-party democracy is “the life of the Party; it is the important basis for the Party’s positive and healthy internal political life” (是党的生命, 是党内政治生活积极健康的重要基础). In this context, democracy refers to ensuring collective decision-making, deemphasizing the power of individuals, and encouraging internal debate.

Collective leadership and decision-making are mentioned in three of the articles. One describes the former as “the core and basis” (核心和本质) of democratic centralism and “one of the highest principles of the Party’s leadership” (党的领导的最高原则之一). It goes on to note that “Party leadership is the leadership of the party committee collective” (党的领导是党委集体的领导). Another argues that “Collective leadership should give prominence to the roles of team members” (‘集体领导’要突出发挥班子成员作用), while a third piece notes that, “when discussing issues, everyone must have an equal voice and decision-making power” (在讨论决定问题时具有平等的发言权和表决权).

In contrast, the notion that individuals should have outsized power is repeatedly rejected. One formulation appears identically across three separate articles: “Individuals ‘do not set the tone’ before meetings, ‘do not make the final decision’ in discussions, and ‘do not settle things conclusively’ when drafting resolutions” (个人在开会前‘不定调’, 讨论中‘不定音’, 形成决议时‘不定局’, 做到正确集中、集中正确). This message is reiterated amply elsewhere. One piece writes that Party leadership “is not the leadership of one or two people” (而不是一个、两个人的领导) and that “individuals must submit to the organization; the minority must submit to the majority, and individuals must not put themselves above the collective leadership” (个人要服从组织, 少数要服从多数, 个人绝不能凌驾于领导集体之上).

In this understanding, leaders are still seen as crucial, but mainly as people who take responsibility for decisions and facilitate “a democratic atmosphere” (民主氛围) within their respective groups or party committees. This entails making sure that “various views are articulated and collide and various bits of knowledge and insight are actively triggered” (各种意见交流碰撞, 各种真知灼见积极迸发), or that “committee members dare to talk straight ... and the wisdom and strength of the group can be gathered to the greatest extent” (委员敢于直言 ... 最大限度地凝聚一班人的智慧和力量). This “relaxed, democratic atmosphere” (宽松民主的氛围) should “encourage everyone to speak freely and equally while carefully listening to and respecting every suggestion, especially from those who hold differing opinions” (鼓励大家畅所欲言、平等交流, 认真倾听尊重每份建议, 特别是对那些和自己意见相左的同志).

Focusing on the roles of the secretary and deputy secretary, one article notes that it is “extremely important” (非常重要) for them to be “broad-minded and tolerant” (容人雅量和宽广胸襟). Another writes that secretaries “are ‘the head of the team,’ but absolutely should not regard themselves as ‘the head of the family’” (是‘一班之长’，但决不能把自己当作‘一家之主’); while a third argues that secretaries should be “good at accepting advice” (善于纳谏). While a level of vigorous internal debate is called for, the articles nevertheless are clear that maintaining unity is “an important expression of party spirit and moral fiber” (党性、品德 ... 的重要体现) for “leading cadres, and especially high-level cadres” (领导干部尤其是高级干部). However, they also make clear that unity has its “basis” (基础) and “root guarantee” (根本保证) in democratic centralism.

The series is intended, at least in part, as a rebuke of Xi Jinping’s leadership style. Xi himself is mentioned in each article and is sometimes quoted, but only briefly, and only by the title “general secretary” (主席), with no additional epithets or descriptors. By contrast, other former leaders are quoted and praised. Two of the articles refer to Deng Xiaoping. One in particular praises his close relationship with military strategist Liu Bocheng (刘伯承) as an example to show that “whether a team works or not depends on the top two people” (班子行不行，就看前两名). The piece uses a language pun—that the term “comrades” (同志) comes from having a “common” (共同) “ambition” (志向)—to suggest that unity does not derive from a single person but rather a common goal under the ideology of the Party. Another phrase, which implies that Xi’s position today depends on the work of numerous others and advocates for listening to diverse voices, comes from a Qin dynasty advisor: “If Mount Tai does not accept small soil hills, how can it grow bigger? If the river and sea do not accept small streams, how can they become deeper?” (泰山不让土壤，故能成其大；河海不择细流，故能就其深). This is perhaps the closest the series comes to a direct critique of Xi. Mao is also quoted as saying that “the secretariat are the equals of the commission members” (书记是党的委员会中平等的一员)—a stark contrast with Xi’s *Qiushi* piece, which emphasizes Party-CMC unity but omits discussion of the necessity of avoiding a single decision-maker or the commission’s equal role.

This line of criticism signals a narrative shift from the period just before the purges and through their first wave. In speeches delivered in April and September 2023, respectively, Zhang Youxia and He Weidong discussed understanding and implementing various tenets of Xi’s ideological formulations. [4] However, as the second wave of purges began in late 2024, both leaders began placing greater emphasis on rooting out corruption and political loyalty, but with diverging undertones. In a speech given on January 10, 2025, He Weidong explicitly identified loyalty with adherence to Xi’s directives while calling for efforts to fight corruption ([Xinhua](#), January 10). Soon after, Zhang made a similar speech but instead emphasized the need to “ensure obedience to party directives and loyalty to the Party” (进一步铸牢听党指挥、对党忠诚的政治品格) ([Xinhua](#), January 26). In other words, Zhang focused on acting in accordance with the CCP itself, without mentioning Xi. These statements coincided with purges affecting leaders within Zhang’s and He’s circles, weakening the Shaanxi Gang and the Fujian Clique, respectively. However, the language used could indicate growing tension between senior PLA leaders and Xi Jinping as well as among PLA officers. While both Zhang and He have made public statements in support of anti-corruption campaigns spearheaded by Xi, Zhang Youxia’s remarks, in particular, appear to align with a sentiment espoused by the *PLA Daily* articles that emphasizes the importance of collective leadership in the Party over Xi Jinping’s personal authority.

Conclusion

The purging of PLA officials in Xi Jinping's two bases of military support weakens his political power, irrespective of the intentions behind the actions of Zhang Youxia or any other CMC member. Zhang, for his part, is unlikely to attempt to rebel against Xi given the institutional culture of the PLA and his advanced age ([China Brief](#), January 17).

When analyzing PLA discourse, much remains unknowable, and inferences are often speculative. Nevertheless, the developments hinted at in the *PLA Daily* series merit further investigation and careful observation for clues as to what may come next. At a minimum, it seems that Xi's power over the PLA is far from absolute and that the PLA's leadership is not monolithic. Instead, the PLA contains a collection of factions, each with patronage networks and their own interests, and these have the potential to come into conflict with each other and with Xi.

The views expressed are solely personal and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of West Point, the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Notes

[1] The makeup of the CMC has changed since its unveiling in 2022. Former Minister of Defense Li Shangfu (李尚福) disappeared from public view in 2023. His replacement, Admiral Dong Jun (董军), has not been added to the CMC (nor has he been made a State Councilor). Dong was allegedly put under investigation in late 2024, while Miao Hua was dismissed in a new wave of anti-corruption probes, though his name still appears on the ministry's website.

[2] Dong Jun received career assistance from Miao Hua, as did Southern Theater Navy Commander Li Pengcheng (李鹏程), who has since been sacked. For more on those in the PLA Navy who are supposedly under suspicion, see Erickson, Andrew S., and Christopher H. Sharman. "Admiral Miao Hua's Fall: Further Navy Fallout?" CMSI Note 11 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 28 November 2024). <https://digitalcommons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/11/>.

[3] Jin Jiliang (金继亮), Wu Chenggang (武成刚), and Wang Jun (王军) have ties to the JLSF, while Wu Zhibao (吴之保) is from the Aerospace Force. The current commander of the JLSF, Wang Liyan (王立岩), once held a command within the Second Artillery Corps, the Rocket Force's predecessor organization, and the former Rocket Force commissar Xu Zhongbo (徐忠波), once served in the JLSF (The Paper, [May 31, 2015](#), [August 7, 2018](#)). Xu was one of the first to be caught up in the initial wave of purges targeting the Rocket Force ([The Diplomat](#), January 3, 2024). The creation of the Aerospace Force following the dissolution of the Strategic Support Force directly followed the removal of the latter's commander and space component commander during the first wave of purges ([Lianhe Zaobao](#), August 3, 2023). Among the other authors of the *PLA Daily* series, Chen Qinghua is from the CMC Reform and Organization Office (中央军委改革和编制办公室), Shao Tianjiang (邵天江) is a commander of a People's Armed Forces unit in Henan Province, and Liu Huibin (刘会宾) is a staff writer for the *PLA Daily*.

[4] These include the “two establishes” (两个确立) and the “two upholds” (两个维护) and implementing the CMC Chairman's “responsibility system” (席负责制) ([People's Daily](#), April 11, 2023; [Xinhua](#), September 15, 2023). Note that the “two establishes” are:

- Establish Comrade Xi Jinping as the core of the Party Central Committee and the core position of the entire Party; and
- Establish the guiding position of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

The “two upholds” are:

- Resolutely uphold General Secretary Xi Jinping's core status as the core of the Party Central Committee and the entire Party; and
- Resolutely uphold the authority and centralized and unified leadership of the Party Central Committee.