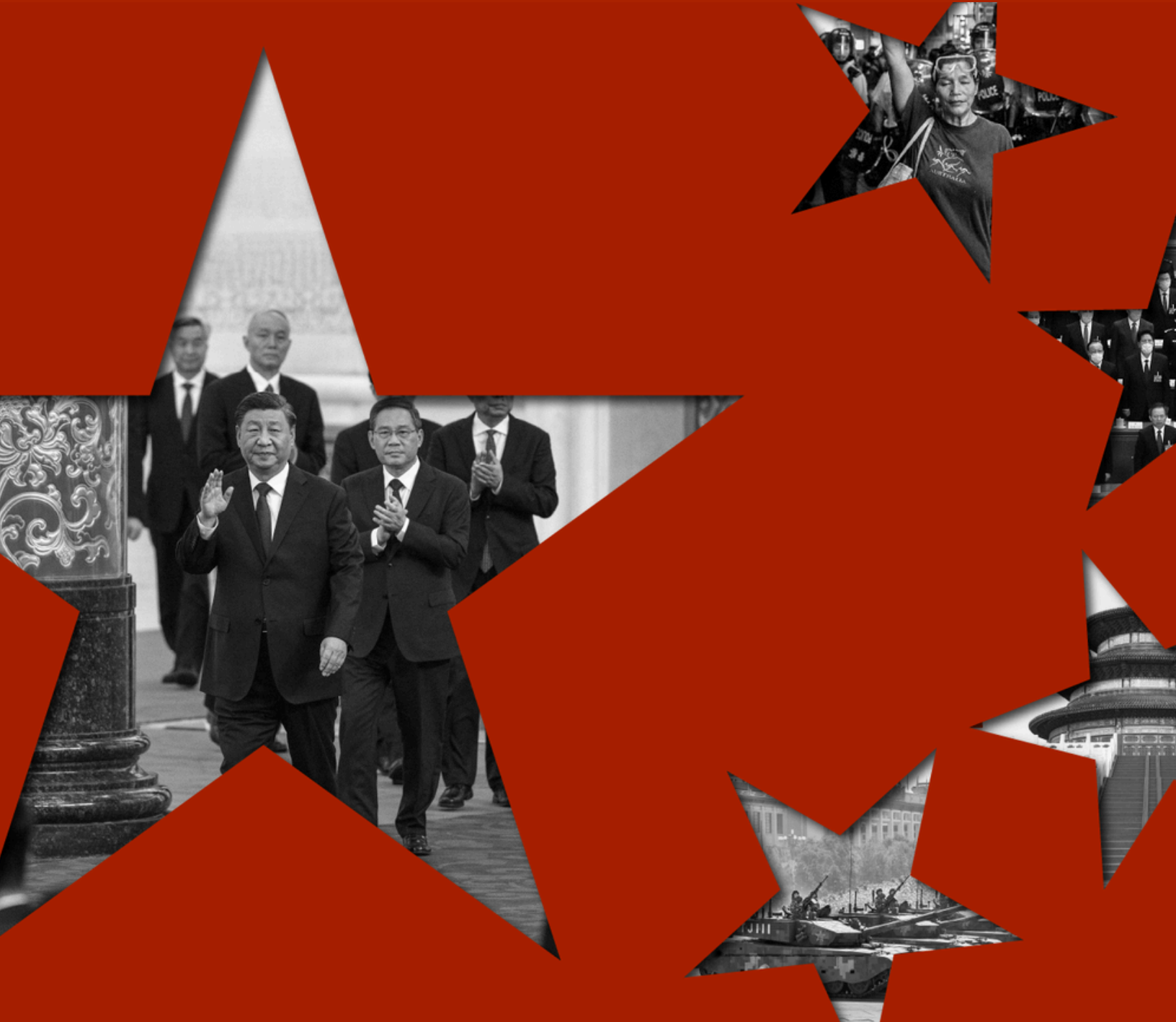


Jamestown

February 6, 2026



China Brief

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Copies of the military's flagship newspaper, PLA Daily. (Source: Taobao)

State Media Signaled Purges Prior to Zhang Youxia's Demise

Arran Hope
February 6, 2026

Executive Summary

- Party-state media has framed anti-corruption work as a top priority since the October 2025 fourth plenum. This can be read as signaling that Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chair He Weidong's downfall was in fact the end of a new beginning in Xi Jinping's struggle to control the military.
- An unusually long 26-part series in PLA Daily on anti-corruption published across the last six weeks of 2025 warned of leading officials abusing their power—possibly a veiled reference to CMC Vice Chair Zhang Youxia.
- A clearer parallel to Zhang appeared in a lengthy PLA Daily article published exactly a week before the investigation into Zhang was announced. The article contained an “unimaginable” story about a Korean War hero who decades later was found guilty of corruption.
- Parsing evidence from Party-state media sources is an inexact science, and conclusions are often only verifiable after the fact. But a review of PLA Daily coverage in the run up to the investigation into Zhang suggests that his downfall may have been more readily anticipated.

In a Fortnight

Several questions have dogged analysts in the days following the downfall of the military's top operational commander. Should we have seen it coming? What precipitated Zhang Youxia's (张又侠) demise? How will General Secretary Xi Jinping proceed? As with all such questions, analysts must begin by discovering what is knowable before making assessments based on the available information.

In Xi Jinping's new era, available information is much harder to come by than in the preceding decades. But sufficient data exist to allow the analyst to put forward arguments underpinned by the evidentiary record. Party-state media remain critical sources. Even though we now sit at a remove of several decades from the heyday of Pekingology, experts remain convinced that these sources are "still as important as they ever were" (SAIS China Research Center, 2024). And yet this kind of analysis has largely been absent following the announcement of the investigation into Zhang Youxia and his colleague on the Central Military Commission (CMC), Liu Zhenli (刘振立). Only a small number of analyses published following the announcement appear to be the result of following what official sources have been saying day in, day out, and using that evidence to support an argument. [1] Interrogating the PLA Daily archive from the months leading up to the purge suggests that those who were paying daily attention to the official messaging were likely less surprised by the recent turn of events.

Trailed in the Paper

Reading back through the principal newspaper of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the PLA Daily, a compelling case can be made that purges of the military leadership would continue following the defenestration of former CMC vice chairman He Weidong (何卫东) in October 2025. From a post-purge perspective, it is easy to see confirmatory evidence in every article on

corruption, each reference to upholding the "CMC chairman responsibility system," and all exhortations to achieve the PLA's centenary goal of building a world-class military by 2027. I have tried to be mindful of such biases in what follows below.

The report from the fourth plenum in October 2025, at which the Party's Central Committee adopted its "Recommendations" (建议) for the 15th Five-Year Plan, contained a single paragraph on the military. The first item it addressed was "implementing the [centenary goal] on schedule" (如期实现建军一百年奋斗目标) (CCP Member's Net, October 23, 2025). The second sentence focused largely on political loyalty. It cited Xi Jinping Thought on strengthening the military, the Party's absolute leadership over the military, and thoroughly implementing the CMC chairman responsibility system. In a list of four aspects of the military that the PLA should promote, political construction in the military is listed first.

In some ways, the emphasis on political loyalty above all else at the plenum makes sense. This was the moment at which He Weidong's removal was confirmed. It was also the session at which Zhang Shengmin (张升民), the CMC's disciplinary head, was elevated to the rank of CMC vice chair. At the same time, however, the "Recommendations" released at the plenum are scoped to a five-year period, not to the Machiavellian machinations of the moment. As subsequent messaging suggests, the likelier inference was that He Weidong's downfall was not the beginning of the end, but the end of a new beginning.

Within a month of the plenum, the PLA Daily published the first article in a series of commentaries (系列谈) on "continuously deepening political re-education and advancing rectification and anti-corruption" (持续深化政治整训、纵深推进正风反腐). Appearing on the

In a Fortnight

paper's second page (but highlighted on the front), the article begins by declaring that "the PLA cannot tolerate corruption, and a mighty and civilized force must not be tarnished" (人民军队不容腐败，威武文明之师不容玷污). It goes on to state that, "at present, our army's anti-corruption struggle has entered a new critical juncture, and the situation is severe and complex" (当前，我军反腐败斗争进入一个新的关口，形势严峻复杂) ([PLA Daily](#), November 11). At the time, readers might have assumed that this was referring to fallout from the He Weidong case. But in retrospect, announcing a "new and critical juncture" likely signaled that more was still to come.

This series extended to at least 26 articles, spanning more than six weeks. The sheer number of column inches allocated to this topic signals its ongoing centrality following the fourth plenum, and perhaps even its unusual significance in recent history: a cursory search has failed to find other "series" (系列谈) with anywhere near as many instalments. [1] The penultimate article in the series alerted readers to the danger of being "rounded up and hunted" (围猎), warning that those doing the hunting "often ... hide within friendships and familial bonds, making them highly covert" (往往 ... 隐藏在友情和亲情之中，具有较强的隐蔽性) ([PLA Daily](#), December 26). This may be a veiled reference to senior leaders like Zhang Youxia, though this is far from obvious. The article that appears most likely to point toward Zhang is the 26th, and final, instalment. It notes that "leading officials wield a certain degree of power" (领导干部手中都掌握着一定的权力), before going on to observe that "there remain individual leading Party members and officials who abuse public power for private gain" (然而现实中，仍有个别党员领导干部公权私用), a phrase that has appeared elsewhere in the series. The article suggests that "this serves as a warning to us that power,

regardless of how much one has ... can be abused" (这警示我们，权力不论大小 ... 可能被滥用) ([PLA Daily](#), December 27).

Other articles outside the series have rehearsed similar themes. The leading commentary on the front page of the December 26 issue of [PLA Daily](#) describes the fight against corruption as "an ongoing process with no end in sight" (只有进行时，没有完成时). Reporting the outcomes of a Christmas Day politburo meeting to hear a report from the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, it framed recent purges as representing a continuation of the Party's efforts to rectify conduct and fight corruption since 2012. It repeats the *tifa* (提法) that the military's anti-corruption struggle has entered a new phase, and calls for the PLA to "continue to advance the rectification of ideology, personnel appointments, organizational structures, conduct, and discipline" (持续深化政治整训，贯通抓好整顿思想、整顿用人、整顿组织、整顿作风、整顿纪律) ([PLA Daily](#), December 26).

A second commentary, published on January 12, appears even more relevant. Subtitled "written as the People's Army continues to deepen political rectification and consolidation in the new era and on the new journey" (写在新时代新征程人民军队持续深化政治整训之际), embedded in the article is the story of Zhao Zhili (赵志立). A decorated soldier, Zhao had seen action in the Korean War before being found guilty of corruption decades later. "Nobody could have imagined" (谁也没有想到) that this might happen to such a valiant and supposedly loyal soldier, the author writes ([PLA Daily](#), January 12). Exactly one week after the article was published, the Ministry of National Defense announced that the Party Center suspected him of "serious violations of discipline and law" (严重违纪违法) and had placed him under investigation ([MND](#), January 24). Who could have imagined such a

In a Fortnight

thing? Who indeed.

Conclusion

The analyst must never take the writ of the People's Daily or PLA Daily as fact, but they can treat it as a form of gospel: these outlets represent the Party's truth for the Party's audience. This audience numbers in the millions, even the tens of millions. As such, the messaging needs to be sufficiently clear to be sufficiently understood. This messaging has a clear target audience (or in some cases multiple target audiences), but it is, in one sense, a more reliable guide to what the Party thinks than other sources. The Party operates an increasingly sophisticated information warfare apparatus, in which it uses various channels, both online and offline, for misdirection and obfuscation. When comes to transmitting its intentions to its own membership, it has much less reason to communicate with such opacity.

Most preliminary conclusions that analysts draw from these sources are verifiable, but only after the fact. As with any research program, the key factor that differentiates a good hypothesis from an inferior one is the amount of data one marshals to inform it. It remains the case that there is little substitute to following what the Party says on a daily basis, tracking conversations and debates as they unfold, and becoming attuned to changes in wording. For any future analyses of Zhang Youxia, the CMC, or any other seemingly inscrutable topic, one guiding question in the production of analysis, therefore, should be: have we deeply studied the evidence, and thoroughly implemented our findings?

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Notes

[1] Here I am thinking principally of the excellent work of K. Tristan Tang (China Brief, [January 26](#), [February 3](#)).

[2] China Brief covered the first two instalments in this series back in early November ([China Brief](#), November 14). If any readers have evidence of PLA Daily series of a similar—or even superior—length, this author would be interested to know more! Please get in touch: cbeditor@jamestown.org.

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).



General Zhang Youxia attends the opening session of the National Peoples Congress in Beijing in 2025. (Source: Getty)

Zhang Youxia's Differences with Xi Jinping Led to His Purge

K. Tristan Tang
January 26, 2026

Executive Summary

- On January 24, authorities announced investigations into Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia and Chief of Staff of the CMC Joint Staff Department Liu Zhenli.
- Official statements point to disagreements with Xi Jinping over PLA development and training, and even instances of open resistance to his directives, as the cause of the generals' downfall.
- Zhang Youxia's timeline for PLA joint operations training did not align with Xi Jinping's 2027 deadline for the PLA to be capable of invading Taiwan. His force-building agenda also focused on fewer priorities and placed less emphasis than Xi on military struggle as a standalone objective, instead integrating it into training activities.

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Executive Summary (continued)

- January 2026 marked the start of the final annual training cycle before 2027. The divide between Zhang Youxia and Xi Jinping no longer centered on debate or planning and instead shifted to execution and direct noncompliance. This problem was clearly visible across the PLA, and it posed a serious threat to Xi's authority.

At 3:00 p.m. Beijing time on Saturday, January 24, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) announced that Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia (张又侠) and Chief of Staff of the CMC Joint Staff Department Liu Zhenli (刘振立) face investigation for “serious disciplinary and legal violations” (严重违纪违法) (MND, January 24). At first glance, this move fits General Secretary Xi Jinping's pattern of using distrust-driven anti-corruption purges to secure power, with clear parallels across communist regimes. Some anonymous sources cited in Western media have claimed that Zhang Youxia had leaked nuclear secrets to the United States and was implicated in bribery-for-promotion schemes linked to former defense minister Li Shangfu (李尚福) and others (Wall Street Journal, January 25).

Senior officials in the People's Republic of China (PRC) almost always carry some exposure to legal or corruption issues. Whether Xi Jinping chooses to act is decisive, as the 2023 Equipment Development Department probe that stopped at Li Shangfu but spared Zhang Youxia illustrates (China Brief, September 20, 2023). Based on official statements and recent developments in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), one can identify the probable core reasons and internal logic behind this purge. Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli most likely fell from power due to disagreements with Xi Jinping over PLA development, particularly the joint operations training timeline, and may have pursued policies or issued orders that ran counter to Xi's

directives. (The simultaneous announcement of investigations into Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli indicates the decision stemmed from the same underlying cause.)

Seven Differences With He Weidong Readout Indicate Zhang Youxia's Defiance of Xi

A comparison of the PLA Daily editorials published the day after the announced purges of former CMC vice chairman He Weidong (何卫东) and of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli reveals four political and three military differences (see Table 1 below) (PLA Daily, October 18, 2025, January 25).

The four political indicators suggest that Zhang and Liu likely defied Xi Jinping's directives on military affairs in an open manner. First, official statements described He Weidong and others as having “abandoned their original mission, lost party principles, suffered a collapse of belief, and betrayed loyalty” (背弃初心使命、丧失党性原则，信仰坍塌、忠诚失节). Authorities did not apply this language to Zhang and Liu. This could indicate that personal corruption or private gain did not drive the purge of Zhang and Liu.

Second, while both cases cited damage to the PLA's “political ecology” (政治生态), Zhang was additionally described as causing “severe damage to the military's political awareness” (政治建军). This wording suggests that Zhang did not prioritize political loyalty as the guiding principle of military building. Given the absence of major personal corruption allegations, the core issue likely involved placing military effectiveness above political control.

Third, descriptions of violations of the chairman responsibility system (军委主席负责制) differed in severity in the two cases. Authorities accused He Weidong and others of “seriously undermining” (破坏) the system, while they accused Zhang and Liu of “seriously trampling”

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(践踏) it. The former implies obstruction that diluted Xi's orders, while the latter implies direct defiance or disregard.

Fourth, official language stated that He Weidong “severely damaged the image” (形象) of senior cadres, whereas Zhang Youxia “seriously undermined the image and authority” (形象威信) of the CMC leadership. This distinction suggests that Zhang and Liu's disagreements with Xi reached a visible and widely recognized level within the PLA.

The three military indicators, meanwhile, suggest that Zhang and Liu fell from power because their results in force building and war preparation failed to meet expectations and may have jeopardized Xi Jinping's requirement that the PLA be capable of invading Taiwan by 2027. First, the official statement explicitly accused Zhang and Liu of causing “severe damage to combat capability development” (战斗力建设), a charge absent from the case of He Weidong. This distinction indicates that the CCP leadership viewed Zhang and Liu's actions as having a direct negative impact on PLA military capability.

Second, the language describing their relationship with the Party center differed in weight. Authorities said He Weidong and others “betrayed trust” (信任), while they said Zhang and Liu “betrayed a trust and heavy responsibility” (信任重托). At the 20th Party Congress in late 2022, Xi broke age norms by shifting Zhang from political oversight to operational command as CMC vice chairman. Xi likely sought to rely on Zhang's combat experience and senior status to push forward the new military training system that Xi personally announced in 2020 to correct long-standing PLA training deficiencies (*Xinhua*, November 25, 2020). This role clearly carried a heavier level of trust than was granted to He Weidong and others.

Third, both cases cited negative effects on the Party and the military, but they differed in scope. He Weidong and others “caused severe damage to ... national defense construction” (给 ... 国防 ... 造成极大损害) while Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli “caused serious harm to ... the state” (对 ... 国家 ... 造成极为恶劣影响). References to the “state” point to broader national development. In military terms, this concept centers on resisting external threats or, in the PRC's specific context, achieving unification with Taiwan. [1]

Zhang's Focused Approach Denied Xi's 2027 Timeline

Based on publicly available information, Zhang and Liu likely failed to meet Xi Jinping's requirements for force building related to a Taiwan invasion, and may even have engaged in open disagreement or defiance within the PLA. Other official statements indicate that the root cause of slow progress and resistance likely lay in a fundamental divergence in Zhang's and Xi's views over the timeline for military development.

PLA joint operations training progressed slowly through early 2026 (*China Brief*, January 24). The PLA established a new basic training model in June 2023 and a new combined training model in October 2024, but as of early 2026 had not finalized a joint training model (*Xinhua*, [June 20, 2023](#), [October 22, 2024](#)). Xi Jinping's requirement that the PLA be ready to invade Taiwan likely rests on it achieving a baseline level of joint operational capability, but the absence of a new joint training model makes it difficult for the PLA to reach an appropriate level of joint capability by 2027.

These implementation problems likely stemmed from a divergence between Zhang and Xi over military development concepts. Xi's preference has been to pursue speed and scale, while Zhang favored a more focused and deliberate approach. A key indicator appeared in the defense section of of the 15th Five-Year Plan recommendations

Table 1: Differences Between the Purges of He Weidong and Zhang Youxia

Dimension	He Weidong and Others	Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli
Personal Interests	Abandoned their original mission, lost party principles, suffered a collapse of belief, and betrayed loyalty	
Political Impact	Seriously damaged the political ecology of the force	Caused severe damage to political awareness and the political ecology
CMC Chairman Responsibility System	Seriously undermined	Seriously trampled and undermined
Image and Authority	Caused severe damage to the image of senior cadres	Seriously undermined the authority and image of the CMC leadership
Combat Capability		Caused severe damage to combat capability
Degree of Betraying Trust	Seriously betrayed the trust of the Party Central and the CMC	Seriously betrayed the trust and heavy responsibility entrusted by the Party Central and the CMC
Overall Impact Assessment	Caused severe damage to the Party's cause and to national defense and military development	Caused extremely serious harm to the Party, the state, and the military

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released in October 2025. Two clear differences emerged between the priorities announced by the Party center and Xi's requirements at the 2025 Two Sessions on the one hand, and Zhang Youxia's own articulation of "key tasks" (重点任务) for national defense modernization in November 2025 on the other (Xinhua, [March 7, 2025](#), [October 28, 2025](#); [People's Daily](#), November 12, 2025).

The first point of divergence concerned "accelerating advanced combat power" (加快先进战斗力). The Party center's version listed a wide range of construction tasks and called for stronger targeting, initiative, and shaping in military struggle (斗争). Zhang Youxia's version instead identified networked information systems and unmanned, intelligent warfare as urgent priorities, and called for the full rollout of new models of basic, combined, and joint training. In Zhang's framework, "shaping the struggle" (斗争塑势) appeared as part of joint exercises, joint training, and diversified military employment rather than as a standalone objective. The second point of divergence related to advancing the modernization of military governance. The party center's version and Xi Jinping's 2025 Two Sessions remarks emphasized a "frugal force-building approach" (勤俭建军方针) and a path of high efficiency, low cost, and sustainability. Zhang Youxia did not include these themes in his list of priority tasks, and instead placed them in sections outlining broader guiding principles. In short, Xi sought expansive and assertive military construction and placed heavy emphasis on military struggle. Zhang favored a narrower focus, downplayed struggle as an independent priority, and embedded it within training and exercises.

Xi's greater haste can be seen in his aim to achieve joint operational capability for a Taiwan invasion by 2027, whereas Zhang clearly placed this goal closer to 2035. In a November 2025 article, Zhang stated that key tasks to complete

by 2027 included consolidating and expanding advantages, breaking through bottlenecks, and strengthening weak points, while goals to achieve before 2035 would include building on the 2027 outcomes to significantly enhance joint operations based on networked information systems and all-domain operational capabilities ([People's Daily](#), November 12, 2025). This framing indicates that Zhang prioritized resolving long-standing training deficiencies in the near term and did not support moving aggressively into full joint operations training to meet Xi's 2027 deadline.

Notably, signs of tension between Xi Jinping and Zhang Youxia had already surfaced during the 2025 Two Sessions, a critical period for drafting the 15th Five-Year Plan ([Xinhua](#), October 28, 2025). First, in Xi's annual address to the PLA delegation, he unusually invited speakers who did not come from the CMC or senior command institutions. This departure from past practice suggested Xi's distrust of senior officers' views, likely including Zhang and other top commanders ([China Brief](#), March 15, 2025). (Note that He Weidong disappeared shortly after the Two Sessions concluded). Second, when Xi departed the closing session of the Two Sessions, Zhang Youxia stood with his back to Xi. In Chinese elite politics, especially since Xi consolidated power following the 19th Party Congress, such behavior is highly unusual and politically risky ([HKTKWW](#), March 11, 2025). Third, during routine individual speeches by CMC members at the Two Sessions, neither Zhang nor Liu mentioned the "CMC chairman responsibility system," despite having done so in previous years ([China Brief](#), April 11, 2025). Publicly affirming this principle serves as a basic signal of loyalty to Xi. Their silence suggests significant disagreement with Xi and may even reflect opposition to the system itself.

Taken together, political and military evidence points to disagreements between Zhang and Xi

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over the pace and method of joint training. Both officers possess real operational experience and likely held firm views on combat and training requirements. They may have judged some of Xi's objectives, including the force-building timeline, as unrealistic, and resisted or declined to implement them on professional military grounds.

Xi Moved to Act by Shortening Timelines

January 2026 marked the start of the final annual training plan before 2027 and the initial implementation phase of the 15th Five-Year Plan. Earlier frictions reflected disagreements in planning and rhetoric, but as they shifted into concrete disputes over implementation, they appear to have become explicit, public, and potentially irreversible acts of defiance against Xi Jinping's directives.

Xi likely focused most on the annual training plan because it directly revealed whether Zhang and Liu intended to meet the 2027 requirement. Each January sees the launch of a new training cycle. The disclosure of training content, schedules, and execution would have exposed the gap between Xi's demands and Zhang's approach. These differences, and signs of open noncompliance by Zhang and Liu, likely circulated within the PLA. Joint training progress was already lagging behind Xi's targets, and the new plan showed no correction to this trend. As the divergence became visible, Xi was prompted to move quickly: the launch of the 15th Five-Year Plan in 2026 would have further clarified implementation gaps.

The timing underscores Xi's urgency and resolve. Zhang and Liu last appeared publicly on December 22, 2025, and authorities announced their purge on January 24. Officials released the announcement on a Saturday afternoon, and PLA Daily even published its follow-on editorial in advance via Xinhua late the previous night

([Xinhua](#), January 24).

Conclusion

Observers can frame this case through the broad lens of power struggles common to CCP politics. Recent PLA developments, however, reveal concrete and specific indicators that clarify the underlying dynamics.

The impact of removing Zhang and Liu on the PLA's ability to invade Taiwan likely did not rank as Xi Jinping's primary concern. Their approach to war preparation did not align with Xi's objectives, and whether they remained in office or not would not have enabled the PLA to meet the 2027 target. Their continued presence instead posed a challenge to Xi's authority. Given that Zhang could not deliver the rapid development of joint operational capability that Xi demanded, Xi had little reason to justify Zhang's exceptional age waiver or extended tenure.

Although the probability of achieving the 2027 Taiwan invasion capability remains extremely low, Xi Jinping will likely appoint successors who are willing to execute his military blueprint in place of Zhang and Liu. Under intense pressure, these successors may accelerate the pace of joint operations training and push forward joint drills or even exercises in a more rushed manner. As a result, while the Chinese military remains unlikely to invade Taiwan in the near term, PLA training and exercise activity may become more aggressive and more frequent than in recent years.

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Notes

[1] Taiwan has long been viewed by the PLA as lost territory that must be unified, making training around Taiwan highly relevant for realistic combat preparation. Given that 2027 marks the PLA's centenary, Xi Jinping has repeatedly linked military readiness to safeguarding sovereignty and achieving national rejuvenation, which explicitly includes complete national unification (see [CMSI Notes](#), March 13, 2025). A critical reference point came in 2023, when CIA Director William Burns stated that Xi Jinping had instructed the PLA to be ready by 2027 to conduct a successful invasion ([CBS News](#), February 3, 2023).

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).



Portrait of Josef Stalin displayed at Tiananmen on March 9, 1953, following the announcement of Stalin's death. (Source: Zhihu)

Late Stalinism in Beijing

Matthew Johnson
January 26, 2026

Executive Summary

- General Secretary Xi Jinping appears to have prevailed in the latest round of military purges in the Central Military Commission (CMC), but only by further dismantling the institutional safeguards that once stabilized elite politics—deepening, rather than resolving, long-term regime fragility.
- The removal of generals Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli marks the elimination of the last residual chain of military authority not fully subsumed under the “CMC chairman responsibility system,” meaning that military command now begins and ends with Xi personally.

Executive Summary (continued)

- This consolidation does not alter near-term timelines on Taiwan, but it accelerates political drift in the People's Republic of China toward a late Stalinist disequilibrium in which Xi's personal control is maximized at the cost of orderly succession management, professional and expertise-based authority—exemplified by figures like Zhang Youxia—and tolerance for dissenting or corrective views within the leadership.

In “Terminal Authority: Assessing the CCP's Emerging Crisis of Political Succession,” we argued that General Secretary Xi Jinping remained in control of the Chinese Party-state, even as the system around him exhibited growing strain. This judgment was deliberately paradoxical with respect to consequences for the Party itself ([China Brief](#), July 26, 2025). On the one hand, there was no visible indication that Xi's personal authority had meaningfully eroded. On the other, history shows that the personalization of power he has engineered carries an unavoidable cost: systems governed more by diktat than by institutions are inherently unstable.

That assessment did not rest on an assumption of equilibrium within the system. We noted growing instability inside the military apparatus and mapped a range of possible scenarios this instability might precipitate. On balance, we concluded that Scenario 1, in which Xi continues to dominate, remained the most likely description of the political status quo based on the evidence available in spring and summer 2025. At the same time, we cautioned that signs of rebalancing within the military–security apparatus were adding ambiguity to perceptions of an otherwise intact Xi power center.

What has unfolded since suggests both judgments were right. Available evidence

indicates that, for now, Xi has largely prevailed in the military contest, in the sense that the latest round of purges has proceeded without overt resistance. Yet the deeper dynamic we identified still holds. These persistent signs of instability within the system mean that a transition toward fragmentation and elite realignment cannot be ruled out. There is no fixed timetable for such transitions; they may unfold gradually or erupt suddenly if competition spirals. By dismantling the succession management norms the Party once relied on, Xi has exacerbated precisely the internal tensions those norms were designed to contain, ensuring that the dictatorial system he has rebuilt will not hold forever.

The Logic of Personalistic Centralization

On January 24, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and state media announced investigations into General Zhang Youxia (张又侠), vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), widely regarded as a key enforcer within Xi Jinping's military restructuring, and General Liu Zhenli (刘振立), chief of staff of the CMC's Joint Staff Department ([MND](#), January 24). Both were accused of “serious violations of discipline and law” (严重违纪违法), the standard formulation used to justify elite removals.

Two interpretations immediately presented themselves. The first frames the move as anti-corruption; the second as Xi eliminating rivals. Both readings, however, are flawed: the first does not withstand serious scrutiny, while the second is insufficient as an explanation. Anti-corruption in the Party is best understood as a legitimating language rather than a motive. In a Leninist system characterized by opaque procurement, discretionary authority, and political mediation of resources, virtually all senior cadres are corrupt in some sense. Particularly at the highest levels of power, “anti-

corruption” functions as a covering explanation for coercive reorganization that obscures its underlying political purpose. Elimination of rivals within the military is also insufficient. Zhang Youxia is often framed as a credible challenger to Xi. He was a pillar of authority within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)—one of the few senior officers with combat experience and long-standing institutional credibility. But his removal is better understood through a wider lens. Xi has been purging not just individuals but entire institutional structures as part of a long-running project to remake the military that began in his first term as general secretary. Zhang was not dangerous because he represented an alternative political program or factional challenge to Xi. He was dangerous because he embodied a chain of command that predated—and partially survived—Xi’s restructuring of the PLA.

The PLA’s own explanation hints at why both interpretations miss the point. In a January 25 PLA Daily editorial announcing the investigations, Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli are not primarily accused of personal enrichment or disloyalty, but of having committed a political offense against Party’s leadership over the armed forces. The editorial states that the two men “seriously trampled upon and undermined the CMC chairman responsibility system, and in doing so seriously fueled political and corruption problems that weaken the Party’s absolute leadership over the military and endanger the foundations of the Party’s rule” (严重践踏破坏军委主席负责制，严重助长影响党对军队绝对领导、危害党的执政根基的政治和腐败问题) (PLA Daily, January 25). In other words, the offense is defined not as corruption in the ordinary sense, but as interference with the singular chain of authority that links the Party center to the armed forces through the CMC chairman—Xi Jinping himself.

The military has been subjected to this same

personalistic logic since Xi’s first term. Beginning in 2015–2016, Xi partially dismantled the command structure that had governed the PLA for decades. The establishment of the Joint Staff Department (JSD) of the CMC in January 2016, superseding the former PLA General Staff Department, was presented another modernizing “reform.” In practice, it tied operational planning, joint training, and combat readiness directly to the authority of the CMC chairman ([China Brief](#), May 11, 2017). This reorganization ultimately operationalized the emerging “CMC chairman responsibility system” (军委主席负责制), which was formally codified after the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 and defines all major defense and force-building decisions as resting with the CMC chairman and, according to a 2015 PLA commentary, requires the entire PLA to carry out the “comprehensive, accurate, timely, and effective implementation of the resolute intent and strategic directives of the CMC chairman” ([China Leadership Monitor](#), January 23, 2018).

This context is the key to understanding Zhang’s fall: it marks the elimination of a residual source of authority that survived earlier rounds of institutional upheaval. What appears to be underway is a further—and possibly final—stage of centralization in which few institutions, offices, or individuals retain authority independently of the chairman responsibility system, even if the process itself generates new risks of elite backlash.

Institutional Mayhem in Totalitarian Systems

The pattern of “personalistic centralization” is not new. At the start of his tenure, Xi confronted a domestic security apparatus that had accumulated substantial autonomy under Zhou Yongkang (周永康). His response was not limited to purging Zhou himself. It involved restructuring the entire architecture of state security. The creation of the Central State

Security Commission in 2013 subordinated the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Public Security, and related political-legal organs directly to the Party center and, in practice, to Xi personally (War on the Rocks, July 18, 2016).

Xi's logic has a long pedigree. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt argued that totalitarian systems do not rule through stable institutions. They rule by keeping institutions in motion—fragmented, reorganized, and permanently insecure. The purpose is not administrative efficiency, but the security of the leader. [1] Stable institutions create alternative points of appeal and therefore alternative sources of legitimacy. They generate norms, procedures, and coherent policymaking bodies that can outflank the more reactive implementation of one-man rule. Totalitarian rulers therefore weaken institutions deliberately.

Seen through this lens, Xi's evisceration of the CMC is logical. The CMC nominally functioned as a body through which military authority was collectively exercised and mediated. It has now been reduced to a veneer. With Zhang Youxia

and Liu Zhenli removed, the CMC reportedly consists only of Xi himself and the head of its discipline inspection apparatus, Zhang Shengmin (张升民) (see Figure 1). The lesson is not just that Xi distrusts potential rivals within the PLA. It is that he distrusts any alternative center of authority as such.

Three Implications From the Latest Purge

Implication 1: Military Command Now Begins and Ends with Xi

The 2016 reorganization of the PLA into a theater command system did not replace the CMC. Theater commands remain subordinate to it. But the political meaning of the arrangement has changed. As the CMC has been hollowed out as a collective deliberative body, the JSD now functions beneath a vestigial apex that serves as a conduit for Xi's personal authority.

Xi's largely unnoticed January 22 issuance of the Military Theory Work Regulations (军事理论工作条例) reinforces this shift at the strategic level (Xinhua, January 22). According to Xinhua, the regulations are guided by "Xi Jinping Thought

Figure 1: The Erosion of Senior Leadership on Xi's Central Military Commission



(Source: X/Taepodong)

on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era” (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) and “Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military” (习近平强军思想), and reaffirm the principle of “overall command by the Central Military Commission, combat readiness by the theater commands, and ‘construction’ by the services” (军委管总、战区主战、军种主建) (see *PLA Daily*, May 10, 2016). In effect, these regulations further narrow strategic reasoning within the PLA by institutionalizing review for political alignment with principles of Xi’s “thought.”

Taken together, these developments point to a system in which operational and strategic authority flows through structures bearing Xi’s personal imprint as supreme military commander.

Implication 2: Timeline for Taiwan Remains Fundamentally Unchanged

The CMC purge does not materially alter the correlation of forces across the Strait. It does not meaningfully accelerate or delay operational timelines. At most, it reflects internal judgments that political loyalty and command coherence are prerequisites, whether for faster action or for more deliberate encirclement.

The timing of the move likely tells us more about internal dynamics we will never see than about external contingencies. Personalist systems are opaque by design. Decisions often reflect calculations about loyalty, fear, and control that remain invisible to outsiders.

Implication 3: Late Stalinism and the Party’s Cul-de-Sac

This brings us back to the uncertainty identified at the end of “Terminal Authority” ([China Brief](#), July 26, 2025). Xi’s dominance today is real in structural terms, even if the day-to-day

execution of his directives relies on intermediaries and loyalist networks whose actions are not always fully transparent. Like Joseph Stalin, Xi has fused personal authority with regime survival. There are no independent institutions of appeal. There are no durable procedures for succession. There is only the leader and the system he holds together.

This produces permanent uncertainty. As long as Xi remains in command, he can dictate terms. But the very mechanisms that secure his dominance—purges, institutional hollowing-out, and the dismantling of competing centers of authority—also ensure that the system cannot easily survive without him. Late Stalinist systems can endure for years, but with diminishing economic dynamism. And they have a much harder time enduring transition.

Conclusion

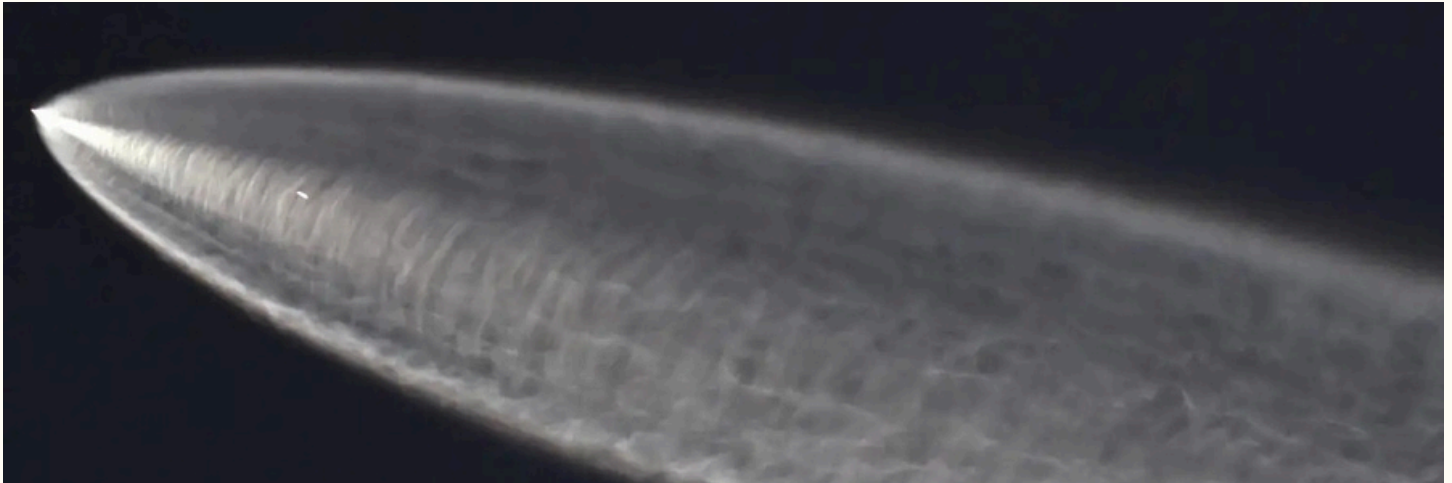
Xi has solved the problem of control. But he has also ensured that when the center fails, whether through succession crisis or elite fracture, it is primed to fail catastrophically.

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Notes

[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).



SpaceX Launches Starlink Satellites Aboard Falcon 9 Rocket in September 2025.
(Source: Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images)

PLA Assessments on the Centrality of Space Power in Ukraine

Sunny Cheung
January 30, 2026

Executive Summary

- Across People's Liberation Army units, defense universities, and defense state-owned enterprises, Russia's war in Ukraine has reinforced calls for the Chinese military to develop indigenous LEO satellite networks, resilient positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) architectures, and integrated space-cyber-electromagnetic countermeasures tailored to high-intensity, information-transparent conflicts.
- Researchers at military institutions describe the decisive advantage that satellite systems have provided Ukraine as "asymmetric transparency" (不对称透明), in which Ukraine is able to continuously observe Russian forces, while Russia does not have an equivalent capability.
- Experts argue that traditional counterspace approaches centered on hard-kill anti-satellite weapons are economically inefficient and politically escalatory, prompting a doctrinal shift toward soft-kill measures targeting networks, terminals, and services.

Executive Summary (continued)

- Military analysts assess that Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks the first large-scale conflict in which commercial satellite systems—especially low-Earth orbit (LEO) communications and commercial remote sensing systems—have functioned as core battlefield infrastructure rather than auxiliary support.

Editor's note: This is the final installment in a four-part series on the lessons that the People's Republic of China has learned from observing Russia's war in Ukraine. The first three articles can be read [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

In December 2025, Beijing submitted its largest-ever coordinated filings for satellite spectrum and orbital slots to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Covering 203,000 satellites, the filings indicate plans to build extensive non-geostationary satellite constellations ([Science and Technology Daily](#), January 11). The move came shortly after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee elevated commercial space to the status of a “strategic emerging industry” (战略性新兴产业) in its recommendations for the upcoming five-year plan. This designation will trigger a new wave of state support and private investment ([Xinhua](#), October 28, 2025; [China Brief](#), December 6, 2025).

Satellite constellations, like many space technologies, are dual-use. Researchers with ties to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are studying how such satellite systems have reshaped the battlefield during Russia's invasion of Ukraine ([RAND](#), March 24, 2025; [China Brief](#), April 11, 2025). Chinese military and defense-technology writers have treated the war as a stress test of modern space-enabled warfare, especially the fusion of military space assets with commercial satellites. Across dozens of Chinese-language analyses, a consistent

picture emerges. Satellites are no longer a niche enabler sitting behind air, land, and maritime operations. They are increasingly framed as the “foundation” (底座) of combat power, supporting command and control (C2), precision strike, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), battlefield connectivity, and even the public information environment.

These experts have interpreted Russia's invasion of Ukraine as the clearest demonstration to date of three interlocking realities. First, commercial satellite communications—especially low-Earth orbit (LEO) constellations like Starlink, operated by U.S. firm SpaceX—can function as resilient wartime infrastructure (He and Zhang, 2022). [1] Second, U.S.-led intelligence support, combined with commercial remote sensing and civilian open-source intelligence, can create “asymmetric transparency” (不对称透明), an uneven visibility regime in which one side becomes continuously observable while the other preserves greater concealment (Zhou, 2023). [2] Third, attempts to counter space-enabled advantages are shifting from a narrow focus on “hard kill” strikes—such as kinetic anti-satellite operations—toward multi-domain suppression centered on “soft kill” (软杀伤) strikes. These span electronic warfare (EW), cyber operations, and attacks on ground segments, user terminals, and data flows (Sun et al., 2025). [3]

From ‘Information Channel’ to Strategic Resource

The literature in Chinese analyzing Russia's war in Ukraine argues that Starlink's wartime role has evolved from an information channel into a strategic resource. One analysis describes how Starlink “leapt” (跃升) beyond connectivity into a broader strategic lever affecting operational tempo and resilience (He and Zhang, 2022). [4] Discussion of this shift is also seen in operational writings.

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Researchers associated with PLA units and launch-site organizations often emphasize that the decisive value of LEO satellite communications lies in survivability through scale: thousands of satellites, frequent replenishment, and distributed ground infrastructure make complete suppression difficult, especially when a constellation is commercially operated and globally supported. An article on Starlink by an engineer affiliated with a PLA-linked launch-site organization uses the example of Starlink's deployment in Ukraine to warn that wartime communications cannot depend on a small number of advanced assets, and so systems must be developed to withstand persistent disruption and be capable of rapid adaptation (Peng et al., 2022). [5]

The same logic appears in analyses by technical authors who concentrate on the architecture and security posture of LEO constellations. An engineer at the Shanghai Aerospace Electronics Technology Institute (上海航天电子技术研究所) argues that Starlink's primary security challenge lies in maintaining service under sustained electronic and cyber attack. He notes that the constellation's "software-defined architecture" (软件定义) allows SpaceX to rapidly modify waveforms, routing, and terminal behavior. This enables rapid mitigation of jamming and cyber interference, but it expands the system's cyberattack surface, making cybersecurity and system hardening increasingly central to space combat effectiveness (Liu et al., 2023). [6] In this view, "satellite internet" (卫星互联网) is a contested operational environment, and its resilience depends on cybersecurity as much as orbital mechanics.

Asymmetric Transparency and the Intelligence-Commercial Nexus

If LEO communications are the plumbing of the information battlespace, Chinese analysts portray data and intelligence as the system's

decisive flows. According to an article by an academic at the Shanghai University of Political Science and Law, it has been U.S. intelligence support that has given Ukraine systemic advantages in strategy, tactics, situational awareness, communications, intelligence collection, and logistics. This has placed Russian forces in a condition of persistent exposure, while Ukraine has only been "semi-transparent" (半透明) to Russian observers (Zhou, 2023). [7] Drawing a direct parallel to the PRC, the author explicitly calls for a "Chinese Starlink" (中国版星链) to strengthen wartime communications security and battlefield awareness.

The logic of "asymmetric transparency" is reinforced by work on civilian open-source intelligence (OSINT) and commercial imagery. Russia's war in Ukraine has demonstrated how civilian OSINT can influence official practices and shape official disclosure strategies (Liu and Xu, 2024). [8] Modern wars create a multi-source transparency regime in which satellites, smartphones, and social media become mutually reinforcing sensors. In such a regime, suppressing a single sensor class rarely eliminates visibility, instead forcing adaptation and substitution.

PRC aerospace commentators point to the operational consequences of commercial satellite use. In one article, published by the Global Times, Western commercial satellite firms are described as "disrupting the game" (搅局) by injecting ISR data, imagery, and connectivity into Ukraine's war effort, widening the coalition's sensor and communications base without formal military force deployment (Global Times, February 7, 2023). [9] This indicates that analysts in the PRC believe that any future conflict involving a major power automatically activate an adversary's commercial satellite ecosystem through contracts, voluntary support, or political pressure, thereby enlarging the battlespace and

complicating escalation control.

A related perspective focuses on how satellite-derived intelligence becomes a component of information warfare and narrative contestation. Discussions of “satellite investigations” (卫星调查) in reporting and intelligence assessments emphasize the importance of satellite imagery beyond the battlefield, shaping international perceptions by making claims verifiable to third parties (Cheng and Shan, 2022). [10] The credibility that this form of transparency enables can help shape everything from coalition behavior and sanctions to arms transfers and even public tolerance for a war effort.

Engineering Velocity as Combat Power

A recurring inference in the Chinese technical literature on satellite systems is that wartime advantage stems from “engineering velocity” (技术迭代速度). This refers to the ability to patch, reconfigure, and redeploy engineered systems faster than an opponent can adapt. In this view, constellation survivability is primarily an engineering problem: rapid software updates, flexible network management, and robust terminal security determine whether a constellation can maintain service under hostile conditions, such as jamming, cyber intrusion, or spoofing attempts (Liu et al., 2023). [11]

This argument interacts with a broader emphasis on “system-of-systems confrontation” (体系对抗), in which combat takes place between deeply integrated joint forces. If a satellite constellation’s combat value depends on its integration with ground terminals, gateways, and user applications, then the center of the infrastructure may shift away from the satellites themselves. The operationally salient targets become terminals, control links, and any systems that manages spectrum and data. This is one reason why PLA-linked writers increasingly

stress cyber-electromagnetic operations as decisive levers, as they offer a soft-kill option for paralyzing the satellite network.

From Kinetic Destruction to Service Denial

In discussions of what lessons should be learned from the deployment of Starlink during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the most pointed Chinese analyses focus on how Russia has attempted to counter Starlink and mitigate other space-enabled advantages. Sun Xichao (孙希超), a member of PLA Unit 63670, argues that suppressing Starlink satellites through layered denial—jamming, cyber intrusion, terminal geolocation, and disruption of ground architecture—is the most effective form of countermeasure (Sun et al., 2025). [12] This aligns with the “soft kill” preferences expressed by other authors. The rationale is pragmatic: kinetic anti-satellite strikes are costly, escalatory, and technically difficult, while service denial can be easier and safer.

Other analyses focus more broadly on navigation warfare (“NAVWAR”), a subset of electronic warfare concerned with disrupting an adversary’s global navigation satellite system (GNSS). Some of these analyses highlight the same shift toward contested-spectrum operations. By emphasizing methods to detect and characterize jamming emitters from space, they implicitly treat navigation warfare and electromagnetic maneuver as persistent features of future conflicts rather than episodic disruptions (Zong et al., 2024). [13] If interference and counter-interference become routine, however, then the side that can adapt faster gains operational advantage even without destroying satellites.

For PLA planners, one salient lesson is not simply the need to develop more satellites. It is the need to build an end-to-end warfighting capability around satellites. This requires

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resilient terminals, agile network operations, rapid reconfiguration, and counter-countermeasures.

Crucial to navigation warfare is ensuring the operation of one's positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) systems, while disrupting those of the adversary. Chinese researchers appear interested in how such systems fare under electronic warfare. One analysis highlights interference patterns, and outlines a range of operational consequences for forces relying on GNSS signals. Disruption of such signals can lead to a degradation of precision strike capabilities, unmanned systems failing wholesale, or command and control desynchronization ([Jia et al., 2024](#)). [14] Some experts propose countering NAVWAR techniques via space-based monitoring approaches to map jamming emitters ([Zong et al., 2024](#)). [15]

For PLA observers, the satellite layer in Ukraine is also about weapons effectiveness, and not just ISR support. In particular, weapons technology analysts focus on how satellites enable precision strike and unmanned attack chains. They note that many modern strike systems rely on composite guidance that combines GNSS with inertial navigation systems (INS) to enhance precision, on top of which are layered multiple terminal options. Some see this in operation during Russian strikes using the Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile system, and conclude that satellite-enabled PNT has become embedded as a default component of contemporary long-range fire ([Zhao et al., 2022](#)). [16] Experts from Beijing Institute of Technology and China Ordnance Science Research Institute (中国兵器科学研究院) similarly treat precision-guided munitions as part of an informatized kill chain, where satellite-enabled PNT and airborne platforms contribute directly to accuracy and tempo ([Wang et al., 2024](#)). [17] For PLA planners, the implied lesson is that the decisive factor in

weapons effectiveness is not the missile or shell, but the end-to-end guidance and targeting system. As a result, contesting or protecting satellite-derived PNT will proportionally shape strike outcomes under high-intensity electromagnetic opposition.

A parallel set of writings extends this logic to unmanned strike complexes. One paper coauthored by researchers affiliated with a PLA unit, argue that Starlink tightened the “sensor-to-shooter” (传感器到射手) loop by linking unmanned systems to frontline fires and accelerating “discover–strike–assess” (侦控打评) cycles ([Peng et al., 2022](#)). [18] Officers describe how Ukraine's unmanned surface vessel (USV) raids have depended on satellite connectivity for real-time control and video links, and explain why countermeasures have gravitated toward disrupting service availability rather than attempting to eliminate the entire constellation ([Sun et al., 2025](#)). [19] These analyses imply that satellite services, LEO satellite communications, and PNT enable precision for drones and USVs, while navigation warfare and constellation denial shape the effectiveness of those systems.

At the strategic–industrial level, experts from the Beijing Satellite Navigation Center use the war to assess how sanctions, supply chain constraints, and wartime demand could shape the development trajectory of GLONASS (Russia's own GNSS) and the future of PRC–Russian satellite navigation cooperation ([Lin et al., 2024](#)). [20] The PLA sees two lessons here: first, that wartime performance depends on peacetime industrial resilience; and second, that global dependence can be weaponized, meaning that space power cannot be separated from economic security and technological sovereignty.

Satellites as an Allocated Combat Service

Another cross-cutting theme in the literature on

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Russia–Ukraine satellite warfare is a focus on an operational management problem: if satellites underpin communications, ISR, and navigation, then wartime advantage requires the ability to schedule, allocate, and dynamically prioritize space services under stress. One analysis surveys trends in U.S. military satellite communications operational planning systems, and suggests that the management layer (which governs planning, allocation, and resource optimization) is becoming as important as the hardware layer (Guan et al., 2025). [21] This aligns with earlier Chinese technical research on satellite communications resource scheduling. Experts at the National University of Defense Technology believe that future force effectiveness depends on automated scheduling, conflict resolution, and resilient service orchestration (Fu, 2019). [22] In an asymmetric transparency environment, where an adversary can observe and target high-value nodes, the ability to shift bandwidth, reroute links, and re-task sensors becomes a combat function.

Conclusion

Contained within the PLA’s reading of the use of satellites by both sides in Russia’s war in Ukraine is a diagnosis of the infrastructural character of modern warfare. Satellites—especially commercially operated systems—have become the connective tissue of battlefield coordination, intelligence fusion, and strategic messaging. The war has highlighted how quickly advantages can accrue to the side with viable networks, integrated diverse sensors feeding transparency, and adaptable software architecture. It has also shown that counterspace competition is no longer confined to destructive anti-satellite operations. Modern warfare is increasingly a continuous struggle to ensure service continuity, terminal survivability, spectrum control, and data credibility.

For PLA planners, the overarching lesson is an

uncomfortable one. It is the realization that space support can no longer be treated as a specialized rear-area function, but must be viewed as a frontline contest—one that links orbital systems to industrial resilience, to commercial ecosystems, and to the politics of information. The PLA’s evolving focus on LEO constellations, asymmetric transparency, and service-denial counterspace suggests that future PLA force modernization will treat satellite-enabled warfare as a central axis of system confrontation, not an enabling footnote.

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Notes

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The PRC's real estate slump has led local governments to pursue predatory tactics to raise funds and balance accounts. (Source: Getty Images)

The PRC's Local Governments Turn to Predatory Revenue Tactics

Youlun Nie
February 3, 2026

Executive Summary

- The structural exhaustion of the “Land Finance” model has compelled local governments in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to abandon the reform-era “developmental state” model, pivoting toward a paradigm of “predatory survival” to avert insolvency.
- To bridge widening deficits, local authorities have resorted to aggressive wealth extraction. Beyond intensifying levies on local enterprises and residents, three distinct predatory modes have emerged: instrumentalizing state power for direct extraction; mortgaging long-term public resources for short-term liquidity; and fabricating collateral by capitalizing low-value assets.

Executive Summary (continued)

- These measures represent a degradation of state capacity. By prioritizing immediate liquidity over market stability, local cadres are dismantling the PRC's unified market and eroding the legal predictability required for private sector growth, creating systemic risks that central “debt resolution” initiatives cannot mitigate.

The fiscal compact underpinning local governance in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has fundamentally unraveled. For two decades, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) incentivized local cadres through a “land finance” (土地财政) model, wherein land transfer fees frequently constituted over 40 percent of local revenue, funding infrastructure, servicing debt, and paying salaries. The collapse of the country's property bubble that began in mid-2021 has rendered this model obsolete. Data indicate that revenue from residential land sales has plummeted, slumping 65 percent in 2025 from its 2020 peak as state-backed buyers retreat ([Caixin](#), January 6). This has left the “government-managed fund budget” (政府性基金预算) with a structural shortfall that traditional fiscal transfers cannot bridge.

In 2025, these ramifications shifted from abstract balance sheet deficits to tangible operational crises. The fiscal contraction first hit public institutions (事业单位), with teachers in provinces like Guizhou and Henan reporting canceled performance bonuses and months-long delays in basic salary issuance ([Radio Free Asia \[RFA\]](#), May 9, 2025). The crisis has also breached the core civil service (公务员), shattering the “iron rice bowl” (铁饭碗) even in wealthy coastal jurisdictions. In Zhejiang Province, traditionally a fiscal stronghold, civil servants reportedly received annual pay cuts in the range of Renminbi (RMB) 50,000–150,000 (\$7,200–22,000), on top of pay cuts the previous year, while township officials in Shandong received

only 70 percent of their salaries, often with significant delays ([RFA](#), June 17, 2025). Caught between the immediate exigency of meeting payrolls and the rigid mandate to service massive local government financing vehicle (LGFV) debt, officials have had to recalibrate. In this quest for survival, local governments have resorted to predatory revenue tactics, shoring up their finances through direct extraction of wealth, auctioning off future revenue, and even balance sheet manipulation.

The Instrumentalization of State Power: Direct Extraction

As land revenues evaporate, local governments have aggressively pivoted toward “non-tax revenue” (非税收入) to stave off insolvency. State power—encompassing administrative, judicial, and supervisory organs nominally designed for regulation and public order—is being repurposed as an instrument of direct wealth extraction. This shift has entrenched a predatory incentive structure wherein law enforcement agencies operate effectively as revenue-generating units. The correlation between fiscal distress and predatory enforcement is quantifiable: by May 2025, municipalities facing acute debt pressure, such as Lianyungang in Jiangsu and Quzhou in Zhejiang, reported year-on-year increases in fines and confiscation revenue exceeding 100 percent, inversely mirroring their declining tax receipts ([The Paper](#), May 1, 2025).

Beyond the intensification of routine local seizures, a far more aggressive innovation is the proliferation of “Ocean Fishing” (远洋捕捞). This term refers to a practice in which law enforcement—most typically public security bureaus (PSBs; 公安局)—from fiscally distressed inland jurisdictions assert cross-border authority over private enterprises and their owners located in wealthier coastal economic hubs. Driven by revenue-sharing mechanisms

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that permit local agencies to retain a percentage of confiscated funds as “case-handling subsidies” (案款提留), these organs have monetized their coercive capabilities. [1]

Illustrating this trend is the high-profile case of the Guangdong-based private health technology firm Archealth (壹健康). Reporting in 2024 divulged a massive cross-provincial operation, in which public security forces from Henan Province mobilized over 1,600 officers to Guangzhou, freezing the company’s accounts. The intervention disrupted operations and forced Archealth to abort its planned IPO, exemplifying the destructive capacity of predatory enforcement ([RFA](#), October 29, 2024).

The judiciary is not necessarily a recourse in such situations. Often, it has already been co-opted, acting less as an arbiter and more as an accomplice. A mid-2025 dispute involving a Shanghai-based valve manufacturer saw a court in Shanxi Province freeze RMB 19.3 million (\$2.78 million) of its assets without any direct business relationship, simply to secure cash flow ([Procuratorate Daily](#), June 13, 2025).

Parallel to direct asset seizures, tax enforcement has morphed into a comprehensive dragnet targeting both high-net-worth individuals and historical corporate liabilities. In the first 11 months of 2025, intensified “double high” (双高) audits, which targeted those with a high income and high net worth, recovered RMB 1.52 billion (\$220 million) from 1,818 individuals ([The Paper](#), December 12, 2025). The campaign was exemplified by heavy fines on influencers like Chen Zhen (陈震) ([WallstreetCN](#), December 10, 2025). Authorities have also shattered the tacit “statute of limitations” for corporations, most notably ordering Zhijiang Liquor (枝江酒业) to pay RMB 85 million (\$12 million) in taxes and penalties dating back to 1994. This retroactive aggression, colloquially termed “looking back 30 years” (倒查30年), effectively treats historical

business success as a savings account for present-day fiscal rescue, eroding the legal predictability essential for long-term investment ([Shanghai Securities News](#), June 13, 2024).

The Financialization of Governance: Future Liquidation

When immediate asset liquidations fail to plug the gap, local governments resort to financializing the future itself—a desperate strategy colloquially known as “eating next year’s food” (寅吃卯粮). This represents a fundamental shift away from selling tangible stock such as land and toward the intergenerational monetization of governance rights. By auctioning off monopoly franchises for 20–30 years, officials are effectively extracting revenue from the next five or six administrative terms, sacrificing long-term fiscal elasticity for a one-time cash injection.

The initial wave of extraction, which became prominent in 2022, focused on physical public venues and essential services. In Rongjiang County, Guizhou Province, the local government auctioned off the franchise rights for the county’s funeral homes for RMB 127 million (\$18.2 million)—a sum nearly equivalent to the county’s entire fiscal revenue for the first quarter ([China News](#), August 24, 2022). Langzhong, in Sichuan Province, similarly attempted to auction off the 30-year operating rights for public school cafeterias with a starting price of RMB 180 million (\$25.8 million) ([The Paper](#), July 16, 2022). These transactions did not merely raise funds; they locked in private monopolies over rigid demand, inevitably transferring the cost of debt recovery to the public through service degradation or price hikes for decades to come.

This trend has since expanded to encompass systemic, city-wide service rights. In early 2025, Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, auctioned the

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operating rights for nearly 24,000 roadside parking spots for a 20-year tenure, raising over RMB 730 million (\$105 million) up front ([Southern Metropolis Daily](#), February 24, 2025). Xinzhou, in Wuhan, has gone even further, putting the franchise rights for urban sanitation services on the block for a tenure of 30 years ([Solid Waste Network](#), December 10, 2024). By selling off these essential public functions, local governments are solving a liquidity crunch today by planting a solvency time bomb for the 2030s and 2040s, effectively stripping future administrations of the capacity to manage public utilities.

The logic was taken to its extreme when abstract administrative concepts became monetized. In a striking case, Pingyin County, in Shandong Province, auctioned the 30-year franchise rights for its “low-altitude economy” (低空经济)—a theoretical asset encompassing drone logistics and airspace management—for RMB 924 million (\$133 million). The winning bidder was a state-owned enterprise (SOE) wholly owned by the Pingyin Finance Bureau itself. Such a maneuver—effectively shifting money from the left pocket to the right—signals the ultimate alienation of state power: the transmutation of administrative jurisdiction into immediate treasury liquidity ([National Business Daily](#), November 26, 2024).

The Transmutation of Resources: Asset Fabrication

With land no longer viable as prime collateral, LGFVs are engaging in aggressive financial innovation to prevent balance sheet collapse. This involves repackaging low-value or non-commercial public resources as high-value assets—a process dubbed “turning stone into gold” (点石成金).

A paradigmatic model for this alchemy emerged in Ganxian, Jiangxi Province. A local government assessment valued river sand and

gravel reserves across three rivers at an incredible RMB 6.68 billion (\$960 million) to inflate its asset books (Shanghai Stock Exchange Disclosure, June 20, 2022). By 2025, this desperate tactic had not only proliferated but evolved into a cruder form in underdeveloped regions. In Yi'an, Heilongjiang Province, a province grappling with severe demographic outflow and industrial decline, local authorities capitalized the desilting and disposal rights of two reservoirs. That October, these rights were listed for transfer at a staggering RMB 839 million (\$120 million) for a 20-year period. The sole bidder was a local SOE established merely 11 days prior to the auction (Central News Agency, November 4, 2025).

This tactic is most acute in underdeveloped regions. Unlike coastal peers who can still harvest revenue from a vibrant private sector or high-tech concepts, rust-belt jurisdictions lack both a tax base to plunder and a market for future rights. Left with no alternatives, they resort to the crude valuation of waste—coercing banks to monetize silt and converting systemic insolvency into immediate, toxic liquidity.

A more sophisticated variation of this strategy targets the digital frontier. In 2024, Nanjing Public Transport Group (南京公交集团) capitalized 70 billion lines of bus data to secure a RMB 10 million (\$1.4 million) credit line, while Liuzhou's urban investment arm utilized “Internet of Vehicles” (车联网) data to secure RMB 20 million (\$2.9 million) in bank loans (The Economic Observer, May 5, 2024; Economic Information Daily, August 2, 2024). Although these maneuvers temporarily beautify financial statements, they create fictitious assets that lack genuine market liquidity. The inevitable failure of projected cash flows to materialize risks transferring the local fiscal crisis directly into the PRC's commercial banking system.

Conclusion

Revenue extraction tactics observed in recent years indicate that the PRC's local governments have entered a structural survival game. The developmental state, which once championed business growth to cultivate a tax base, is being supplanted by a predatory apparatus that cannibalizes the economic ecosystem to sustain its own existence.

These measures ultimately represent a profound degradation of state capacity. By prioritizing immediate liquidity over market stability, local cadres are effectively dismantling the PRC's unified market and eroding the legal predictability required for private sector growth. Although Beijing launched a RMB 10 trillion (\$1.4 trillion) debt resolution plan in late 2024, year-end assessments leading up to the 2025 Central Economic Work Conference reveal a grim reality: the package covers only a fraction of hidden liabilities, leaving grassroots regimes in a perpetual crisis where they must slowly consume the very market upon which they rely ([ThinkChina](#), November 26, 2025).

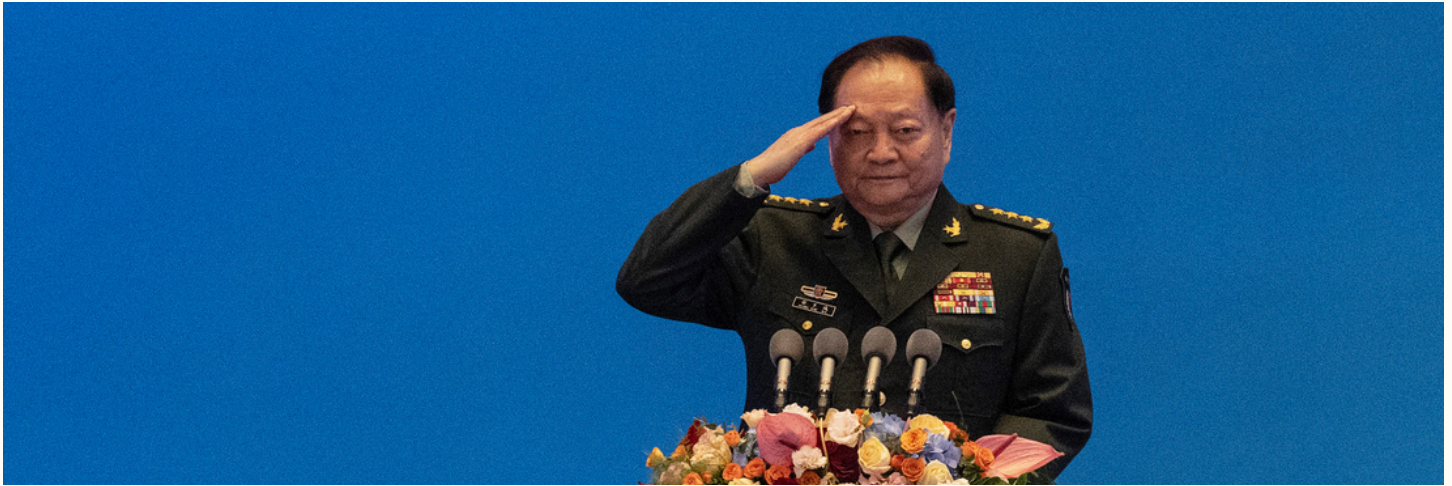
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Notes

[1] While central regulations explicitly prohibit linking fines to departmental budgets, local jurisdictions continue to use “indigenous methods” (土办法) or “hidden rules” (潜规则) to bypass these bans, effectively sustaining a profit-driven enforcement loop ([China Social](#)

[Sciences Net](#), May 21, 2025).

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Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia in Qingdao in 2024. (Source: Getty)

More Information Links

Zhang Youxia's Purge to 2027 Preparations

K. Tristan Tang
February 3, 2026

Executive Summary

- Recent PLA Daily articles include additional details on Zhang Youxia's purge and reveal differences between Zhang Youxia and Xi Jinping over the pace of force building, especially in relation to the 2027 PLA centenary goal, a key political priority of Xi.
- The PLA Daily explicitly links the push to achieve the centenary goal to Zhang Youxia's purge and reiterates that Zhang and Liu had negative effects on the PLA's combat capability development.
- The PLA Daily stresses that the entire force must recognize strategic design, pathways, and target tasks as an established consensus that no one may question, and it underscores that all military planning must submit to political leadership.
- Past Chinese official information shows that joint operations capability is emphasized in the 2027 goal, but joint training under Zhang Youxia's leadership lagged behind expectations and carried political implications of defying Xi Jinping's orders.

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On January 24, authorities in the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced investigations into Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia (张又侠) and Joint Staff Department chief Liu Zhenli (刘振立). Additional articles published on January 31 and February 2 by the PLA Daily, the flagship newspaper of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), have revealed substantial new information (PLA Daily, [January 31](#), [February 2](#)).

These articles reinforce the thesis that Zhang's purge was due to differences with CMC Chairman Xi Jinping over military development, which is also a significant political threat to Xi. Two pieces of evidence indicate that this thesis—a plausible reading of the initial January 25 PLA Daily editorial that followed the announcement of the investigation into Zhang—now appears more likely: direct references to the 2027 centenary goal, and further divergences from coverage of the purge of former CMC vice chairman He Weidong (何卫东) ([China Brief](#), January 26). [1]

Falling Behind Centenary Goal Schedule

Developing joint combat capabilities is a core part of the PLA's centenary goal, which first appeared in the communiqué of the Fifth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee in 2020 (Xinhua, [October 29, 2020](#); [November 26, 2020](#)). Authoritative interpretations of the goal specifically addressed combat capability development. An article penned by former CMC vice chairman Xu Qiliang (许其亮) in the People's Daily in November 2022 listed five major objectives required to achieve the centenary goal ([People's Daily](#), November 7, 2022). Two of these—building a high-level strategic deterrence and joint operations system and promoting the transformation and upgrading of military training—clearly emphasized joint operations. More recently, an article Xi Jinping

personally authored in Qiushi in July 2024 on achieving the PLA centenary goal similarly emphasized joint operations and training in its discussion of warfighting and victory capability ([Qiushi](#), July 31, 2024).

A credible joint operations capability would be a prerequisite for an attack on Taiwan. Western observers, including former CIA Director William Burns and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), have stated that the 2027 goal includes an order from Xi for the PLA to develop the capability to conduct such an attack ([CBS](#), February 3, 2023; [DoD](#), December 23, 2025). It is therefore reasonable to infer that Xi views the military training for which Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli were responsible as exceptionally important. The two generals oversaw critical tasks directly tied to the PLA's principal strategic goal. However, since the centenary goal was declared more than five years ago, joint operations training has progressed more slowly than a 2027 timeline would require ([China Brief](#), January 26).

Linking Zhang's Purge and 2027 Force-Building Planning

The January 31 and February 2 PLA Daily articles link the purges of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli directly to advancing the PLA centenary goal and removing obstacles to building combat capability. While the initial PLA Daily article, published on January 25, did not mention 2027, the January 31 article did make the link in the same sentence. It claimed that the decision to open an investigation into Zhang “constitutes a resolute and powerful push to win the critical battle to achieve the PLA centenary goal” (是打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战的大力推动) ([PLA Daily](#), January 31). Earlier PLA Daily articles criticizing He Weidong also mentioned the 2027 goal, but did not directly link it to his purge, or the purges of other officials.

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The February 2 article, meanwhile, stated that Zhang and others had had a negative impact on the PLA's combat capability and had acted as obstacles to military development: "By resolutely investigating corrupt elements such as Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli," it said, "roadblocks and stumbling stones that hinder the development of the military cause and squeeze out the inflated elements in combat capability building have been removed" (坚决查处张又侠、刘振立等腐败分子，清除的是影响事业发展的拦路虎、绊脚石，挤去的是战斗力建设的水分)" (PLA Daily, February 2). This constitutes another divergence from criticism of He Weidong, which did not accuse him of hindering progress in building combat capability.

Both articles both used language implying the existence of issues in the planning and implementation of force building, areas in which Zhang Youxia had been intimately involved. For instance, the January 31 commentary acknowledged that the purge of Zhang and others could bring short-term difficulties, but argued that everyone in the military must obey the Party leadership and treat the Party's strategic design and implementation planning as a shared consensus (PLA Daily, January 31). This again contrasts with PLA Daily articles related to the purge of He Weidong, which did not use this or similar language, and suggests that Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli faced real problems in this area and that these problems reflected disagreements with Xi Jinping.

The February 2 article clearly emphasizes the primacy of political control over the military, indicating that this lies at the heart of the latest purges. It states that "political awareness" (政治建军) must run through "the entire process of planning formulation and implementation" (规划编制和实施全过程), a phrase that also appeared in articles following the opening of an investigation into He Weidong. But unlike the

coverage of He, in which this phrase was followed by an 88 character series of general policy slogans, in Zhang's case, it was immediately followed by a clear and concise 22-character formulation: "accelerate force transformation and construction, and advance high quality national defense and military modernization" (加快部队转型建设，高质量推进国防和军队现代化). This contrast, coupled with the stronger accusation that Zhang damaged both the political ecology of the PLA and "political awareness" (He Weidong was only accused of damaging political ecology), suggests that Zhang did violate the requirements of political control over the military and caused problems related to the full process of planning formulation and implementation (PLA Daily, [October 24, 2025](#); [February 2](#); [China Brief](#), January 26).

Conclusion

Parsing PLA Daily coverage of the fall of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli reveals a clear contrast with similar coverage of the fall of He Weidong in October 2025. The differences in language used suggest that Zhang (and Liu) disagreed with Xi Jinping over force-building plans, specifically over achieving the 2027 PLA centenary goal, and that these differences had negative effects on PLA combat capability development.

This situation presents a military problem in form, but it constitutes a serious political problem in substance. Once it became clear that Zhang was at odds with Xi, and that Xi's authority was being undermined, only one option was available. Purging Zhang, an alleged obstacle to military development, was ultimately a political decision. Even if newly appointed senior commanders declare the PLA's centenary goals met in 2027, its joint operational capability is unlikely to have been substantively achieved—much as Zhang

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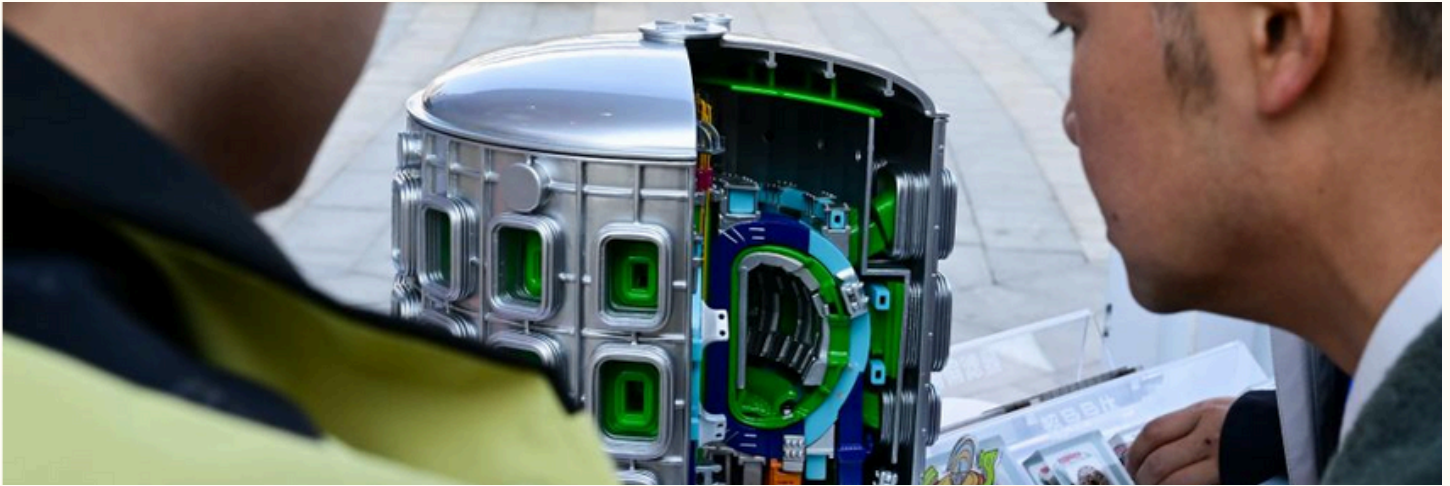
Youxia, a competent and experienced commander, appears to have recognized (Substack/Drew Thompson, January 26).

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Notes

[1] The PLA's centenary goal refers to the "military building centenary struggle goal" (建军百年奋斗目标).

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Burning plasma experimental superconducting Tokamak showing on the Hefei Conference. (Source: Xinhua)

Hefei's Fusion Sector Drives New Approach to Development

Shijie Wang
February 6, 2026

Executive Summary

- Beijing is transitioning fusion investment from fiscal budgets to society-funded models to mitigate short-term fiscal constraints and manage the capital requirements of fusion's long-term research and development cycles.
- This is part of the “Four Chains Integration” framework that links innovation, industrial, capital, and talent chains, utilizing a “whole-of-society” approach to developing fusion by transferring operational and incentive costs from the state budget to social financing platforms.

Executive Summary (continued)

- Formerly a local experiment, this framework is now a national strategy for the People's Republic of China's (PRC) fusion engineering pivot.

On October 18, 2024, General Secretary Xi Jinping visited the city of Hefei, where he encouraged officials to pursue a new framework for the research and development of nuclear fusion. He called for a “deep integration of innovation, industrial, capital, and talent chains” (创新链、产业链、资金链、人才链深度融合), a policy that has since been abbreviated as the “four chains integration” (四链融合). Xi described the framework as a “critical deployment” (重要部署) for the “accelerated implementation of the innovation-driven development strategy” (加快实施创新驱动发展战略), and said that it serves as a tangible manifestation of the so-called “advantages of the new-type whole-of-nation system” (新型举国体制优势) ([CCP Members Net](#), October 16, 2022; [CCTV](#), October 19, 2024). [1] Xi had made similar calls in the past, and this specific model, which involves leveraging social financing (via local government financing vehicles) to drive innovation, was standardized as a national initiative by the Party in October 2022 ([Shaanxi Provincial Government News Bureau](#), December 12, 2024). But until now, take-up has been slow. [2]

One year on from Xi's Hefei visit, the leadership doubled down on the framework. In its “Recommendations” for the 15th Five-Year Plan, the Party Central Committee mandated that enterprises “take the lead” (牵头) and shoulder the primary responsibility for promoting the “four chains integration” policy ([Xinhua](#), October 28, 2025). And now, the policy seems to be getting off the ground. On January 16–17, the “Nuclear Fusion Energy Science and Technology and Industry Conference” (核聚变能科技与产业大会) was held in Hefei.

Coverage from the conference indicates that Xi's directive is being implemented across the sector as research organs seek to operationalize the “four chains” ([Hefei Daily](#), January 17). As part of the overall strategy, Beijing plans to use state-led research bases to dictate technical standards, driving vertical integration and technological upgrading across the industry. The government is simultaneously attempting to construct a state-mobilized financing system to support strategic technologies with long research and development cycles. This new model aims to replace the country's traditional reliance on its fiscal budget for funding these kinds of projects, sharing risk across the broader economy to alleviate fiscal pressure and address persistent capital constraint issues that have long hampered Beijing's ambitions.

Innovation and Industrial Chains Form the Foundation

Under the strategic blueprint, Hefei will leverage its existing nuclear fusion campus, the Hefei Institutes of Physical Science of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (中国科学院合肥物质科学研究院), to serve as the innovation link of the “four chains” ([HIPS](#), accessed January 24). The plan involves upgrading the Nuclear Fusion Industry Alliance (核聚变产能联盟) into a “Nuclear Fusion Industry Federation” (核聚变产业联合会) that can organize fragmented research institutes and upstream/downstream manufacturing enterprises into a unified industrial phalanx ([Science and Technology Daily](#), January 20).

The objective is to facilitate the iterative advancement of innovation from Hefei's Experimental Advanced Superconducting Tokamak (EAST) and the Burning plasma Experimental Superconducting Tokamak (BEST) fusion reactors to the entire fusion value chain, including materials, research and development, manufacturing, and civilian commercialization.

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By allowing multiple sectors to collectively capitalize on innovation dividends, Beijing intends to catalyze technological breakthroughs in other fields ([Science and Technology Daily](#), January 20). For example, at the January conference, the company Lanzhou LS Heavy Equipment (兰石重工) exhibited a new heat exchanger for fusion facilities. This component emerged from the company's prior experience designing exchangers for the EAST reactor ([WeChat/LS Heavy Equipment](#), January 21).

Capital and Talent Chains a Response to Fiscal Pressure

Beijing is also keen to integrate capital and talent chains. At the conference, authorities unveiled a “patient capital” (耐心资本) initiative, launched by 15 financial institutions and involving over 130 others, featuring an initial fund of Renminbi (RMB) 1 billion (\$143 million) with a 15-year duration ([Science and Technology Daily](#), January 20). This long-term deployment is designed to provide continuous financial support for nuclear fusion development, a field that lacks near-term profit potential, by focusing on talent cultivation. The fund is being deployed to support the establishment of a School of Fusion Science and Engineering at Hefei University of Technology (合肥工业大学), and Beijing is planning to set up similar colleges at 20 other institutions within the next five years ([Xinhua](#), January 20; [Party Committee Propaganda Department](#), accessed January 25).

By pooling capital to fund specialized education and research, Beijing is overseeing an asset-light restructuring of the “new-type whole-of-nation system.” Fiscal pressures help explain this shift. Given the field's long cycles and high risks, authorities are pivoting away from direct fiscal appropriations and toward mobilizing a broader pool of social capital. By socializing risk, the state can override capital's short-term profit-seeking orientation and convert social funds

into state-serving patient capital. This approach allows the state to hedge against longstanding capital constraints in strategic science and technology investment without significantly increasing government debt.

Establishing a successful “talent chain” nevertheless requires a massive financial mobilization. By establishing fusion colleges at scale, Beijing intends to mass-produce a highly specialized, highly educated workforce. Unlike elite researchers within the permanent state establishment (编制), whose lifetime salaries, pensions, and healthcare represent fixed, long-term fiscal liabilities for the state, this application-oriented engineering talent team will primarily be absorbed by enterprises within the innovation and industrial chains that are funded by social capital. Through this mechanism, Beijing can decouple the massive human operational and incentive costs of strategic competition from the state budget, transferring them to social financing platforms.

Conclusion

Hefei is implementing the “four chains integration” as a state-led, society-funded model of innovation-driven development. It ensures that the Beijing can continue to support large-scale research projects despite fiscal pressures, and demonstrates how the government, through administrative fiat, is seeking a sustainable model for research and development in fields with limited returns on investment in the short term.

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Notes

[1] The innovation-driven development strategy is one of seven development strategies

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enshrined in the Party Charter (see [China Brief](#), September 26, 2025). Xi also referred to it in his report to the 20th Party Congress in 2022.

[2] This was not the first time that Xi had called for integrating innovation, capital, talent, and industry, but it was the first time that such a formulation has been carried forward and successfully made its way into a five-year plan document. Xi proposed integrating the innovation and capital chains as early as the 9th Politburo study session in 2013 ([Xinhua](#), October 8, 2013). The integration of innovation and industrial chains also predates the current framework. Xi floated a “five chains integration” during a tour of Jiangxi Province in 2019 (which disappeared in later speeches), before issuing instructions for a “two chains integration” during a 2020 visit to Shaanxi Province ([Xinhua](#), December 11, 2019; [Department of Science and Technology of Hunan Province](#), April 28, 2020). He re-emphasized strengthening the integration of the innovation and industrial chains at a May 2021 joint congress of the Party’s top scientists and engineers, and again during a meeting of the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform in February 2022 ([Xinhua](#), [May 28, 2021](#); [February 28, 2022](#)).

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Wang Yi, State Councilor and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), addresses the high-level segment of the 49th regular session of the Human Rights Council. (Source: UN Photo/Jean Marc Ferré)

PRC Attempts to Shape Norms at UNHRC

Anouk Wear & Rana Siu Inboden
February 6, 2026

Executive Summary

- After years of focusing efforts on defending its own human rights record, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has shifted its attention on the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to shaping norms and advancing a more assertive agenda.
- The PRC has pursued varying tactics to do so, such as framing its initiatives in broadly agreed upon terms, seeking to limit language around accountability and protections against transnational repression, and invoking “wolf warrior” rhetoric.

Foreign Policy

Executive Summary (continued)

- The PRC continues to see challenges to advancing its agenda in the UNHRC, but growing support from the Global South and peer authoritarian states has already led to political victories.

In response to the U.S. withdrawal from UN agencies in January 2026, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson Mao Ning (毛宁) reiterated Beijing's commitment to the "core role" (核心作用) of the United Nations in international affairs ([MFA](#), January 8). The PRC is deeply engaged with the UN, but this engagement is driven in part by a desire to alter the international system in ways that more closely align with its preferences. This is particularly true in the case of the international human rights regime, where the People's Republic of China (PRC) is pursuing greater prominence in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) through a multi-pronged approach. This includes a varied diplomatic posture, framing PRC initiatives with innocuous language that obscures its intentions, and resistance to resolutions that seek to strengthen rights with which Beijing disagrees.

General Secretary Xi Jinping first indicated a shift toward a more assertive posture when he proposed efforts to "build a community of common destiny for mankind and achieve shared and win-win development" (构建人类命运共同体，实现共赢共享) at the HRC in 2017 ([Xinhua](#), January 19, 2017). Since then, the PRC has expanded its engagement, shifting from a low-profile approach focused on defending its own record to a more assertive posture as it seeks to shape the international human rights regime.

Promoting CCP Concepts in the UNHRC

Many of the PRC's recent resolutions contain phrases derived from Chinese Communist Party

(CCP) ideology, including Xi Jinping Thought. Such phrases include "community of common destiny for mankind" (人类命运共同体), "mutually-beneficial cooperation" (互利共赢), and "people-centered approach" (以人为本). [1] While these phrases sound innocuous, they embody concepts that run contrary to certain international human rights norms and principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UN](#), accessed January 29).

"Mutually-beneficial" or "win-win" cooperation are phrases Xi first used in 2013 during a meeting at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. Xi spoke of the need to build a "new type of international relations" (新型国际关系) ([China Brief](#), April 25, 2013). When the PRC first proposed a UNHRC resolution in 2018 on "Promoting the International Human Rights Cause through Win-Win Cooperation," other countries had numerous questions and reservations about the term ([Human Rights Watch](#), March 5, 2018; [International Committee of Jurists](#), March 9, 2018). "Mutually beneficial" cooperation suggests that states should cooperate on human rights, rather than holding each other accountable in cases of severe rights abuses.

"People-centered" has been a popular CCP phrase since the early 2000s. According to the Berlin-based nonprofit The Decoding China Project, it is used to "critique of the prevailing global human rights framework" that focuses on individual rights ([Decoding China Dictionary](#), accessed January 27). A 2020 resolution that the PRC tabled at the UNHRC on "people-centered approaches in promoting and protecting human rights" failed to obtain sufficient support and was withdrawn (see Table 1 below). But Beijing has persisted in its attempts to sideline individual and ethnic rights, putting focus instead on "prioritizing societal goals over personal liberties" ([China Decoding Dictionary](#),

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accessed January 27). The council adopted a PRC-sponsored resolution in fall 2025 on promoting economic, social, and cultural rights ([Xinhua](#), October 7, 2025; [OHCHR](#), January 27). [2] While promoting such rights appears positive and productive, the focus of the resolution is emblematic of efforts to draw resources and attention away from civil and political rights, where the PRC's record is particularly poor.

Strategies Have Varied Over Time

Since 2017, the PRC appears to have tested and adapted strategies and postures in the HRC to exert greater influence. Its approach seems to be determined by a combination of the PRC mission leadership's diplomatic style, the environment in the Council, and pragmatism, as it seeks to secure its interests in the Council. At the more aggressive end, this has included actively resisting concepts that oppose the CCP's agenda and adopting "wolf-warrior" rhetoric. At more subtle times, it has shrewdly sought to conceal its intentions by, for example, framing initiatives in broadly agreed upon terms. The PRC first employed this practice after the violent crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989 when it pedaled dialogue and cooperation as the preferred means to advance rights in order to deter countries from supporting resolutions on the PRC's record. The PRC's efforts "serve crystal-clear purposes: to insulate states from accountability mechanisms, to eliminate a role for independent civil society, to promote anti-rights norms, and to deter states from challenging it in these venues," according to Sophie Richardson, co-executive director of Chinese Human Rights Defenders (author interview, December 23, 2025). PRC-initiated resolutions risk distracting from and undermining long-standing human rights principles. The PRC has had some success on this front. In June 2020, it passed a landmark resolution on "promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights."

The PRC has become increasingly assertive during negotiations and discussions on other resolutions to shape and control the narrative in the UNHRC. A Western European diplomat noted that the PRC coordinates with other authoritarian states to weaken the text of UNHRC resolutions, especially those that strengthen civil and political rights and accountability mechanisms. This often includes resisting protections for human rights advocates or including language about sovereignty to limit the ability to hold countries accountable (author interview, May 27, 2025). Another diplomat referenced PRC diplomats' efforts to shape the Human Rights Defenders' resolution, which has enjoyed the Council's support since 2013 and is intended to protect those who engage in human rights advocacy (A/HRC/RES/58/23), and their particular focus on the language surrounding "transnational repression" (author interview, May 26, 2025). The PRC opposed this term during the deliberations on the resolution because of its record engaging in such activity.

PRC Faces Challenges and Sees Growth

As shown in Table 1, the PRC has already successfully secured adoption of resolutions that endorse its ideas. Despite these successes, there is evidence to suggest that the appeal of some of its values is limited. While Beijing has passed nine resolutions in less than a decade and is slowly shaping the substance of the HRC, there are instances in which other nations maintain reservations. PRC diplomats have had to withdraw resolutions at the last minute in light of such concerns, despite strenuous efforts to secure broad consensus, often by courting Global South countries, including invoking a sense of solidarity with the developed world ([The Diplomat](#), October 9, 2024).

The PRC has often been able to secure votes due to its longstanding courtship of the Global South and its consistent defense of many of the most

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repressive countries in the world (Inboden, 2021). [3] For example, the 2021 resolution “Promoting Mutually Beneficial Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights” was jointly introduced along with Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Venezuela, in an attempt to redefine norms and principles to the advantage of those countries. The PRC often gets broader support from the Global South in part because of Beijing’s growing economic and political clout, and a shared interest in defending state sovereignty. However, this can have a deleterious effect on the international human rights regime.

Conclusion

After years maintaining a low-profile role within UN human rights bodies, the PRC is a more active force under Xi, proactively injecting Party ideals and preferences into the international human rights regime. The PRC has been on a steady path building its influence in the UNHRC in particular since 2017. Its strategies have brought many of the CCP’s ideological concepts into the international mainstream, and these efforts now risk weakening international human rights norms and principles.

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Table 1: PRC Resolutions at the Human Rights Council Since 2017

Resolution Title	Date and Session	UN Document Number	Outcome
The contribution of development to the enjoyment of human rights A/HRC/RES/35/21	June 2017, 35th	A/HRC/35/L.33/Rev. 1	Adopted by a vote of 30 in favor, 13 against, and 3 abstentions (UN Digital Library , July 7, 2017)
Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human Rights A/HRC/RES/27/23	March 2018, 37th	A/HRC/37/L.36	Adopted by a vote of 28 in favor, 1 against and 17 abstentions (OHCHR , March 23, 2018)
The contribution of development to the enjoyment of human rights A/HRC/RES/41/19	July 12, 2019, 41st	A/HRC/41/L.17/Rev. 1	Adopted by a vote of 33 in favor, 13 against, and 0 abstentions (UN Digital Library , July 17, 2019)
Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights A/RES/43/21	June 22, 2020, 43rd	A/HRC/43/L.31/Rev.1	Adopted by a vote of 23 in favor, 16 against, and 8 abstentions (UN Digital Library , July 2, 2020)
People-centered approaches in promoting and protecting human rights	October 7, 2020, 45th	A/HRC/45/L.49	Withdrawn
Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights	March 23, 2021, 46th	A/HRC/46/L.22	Adopted by a vote of 26 in favor, 15 against, and 6 abstentions (OHCHR , undated)

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Resolution Title	Date and Session	UN Document Number	Outcome
The contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights	July 2021, 47th	A/RES/47/11	Adopted by a vote of 31 in favor, 14 against, and 2 abstentions (UN Digital Library , July 27, 2021)
Legacies of Colonialism	September 2021	A/HRC/48/L.8	Adopted by vote 27 in favor, 20 abstaining (UN , October 8, 2021)
Realizing a better life for everyone	October 8, 2021, 48th	A/HRC/48/L.14	Withdrawn
The contribution of development to the enjoyment of human rights	July 14, 2023	A/RES/53/28	Adopted by a vote of 30 in favor, 12 against, and 5 abstentions (UN Digital Library , July 18, 2023)
The Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of all Human Rights	July 8, 2025	A/HRC/RES/59/19	Adopted without vote (UN Digital Library , July 16, 2025)
Promoting and protecting economic, social and cultural rights within the context of addressing inequalities	October 6, 2025	A/HRC/60/L.27/Rev.1	Adopted without vote (OHCHR , undated)

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Notes

[1] The Party's preferred English translation of “人类命运共同体” is “community with a shared future for mankind.”

[2] Promoting and protecting economic, social and cultural rights within the context of addressing inequalities (A/HRC/60/L.27/Rev.1).

[3] Inboden, Rana Siu. *China and the International Human Rights Regime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

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