

Purge of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli

The institutional integrity of the People’s Republic of China has encountered its most profound structural disruption in decades following the official confirmation on January 24, 2026, that General Zhang Youxia and General Liu Zhenli have been placed under formal investigation for "serious violations of discipline and law". This development represents a seismic shift in the internal power dynamics of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), effectively decapitating the professional leadership of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and signaling a total collapse of the high-level consensus that has governed military affairs since the 20th Party Congress. The move against Zhang Youxia, the first-ranking Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and Liu Zhenli, the Chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department, occurs against a backdrop of unverified but highly credible reports of an attempted military coup, a nationwide suspension of traditional command hierarchies, and the implementation of Level-1 combat readiness protocols designed to freeze all military movements across the country. The official narrative, disseminated through Xinhua and the People’s Daily, frames these investigations as a continuation of the CCP’s protracted anti-corruption campaign. However, the severity of the measures described by internal sources—including the confiscation of mobile phones from all personnel and the shift to direct command via encrypted telegrams—suggests a crisis of loyalty that transcends mere financial malfeasance. This report analyzes the mechanisms of this purge, the biographical factors of the accused, the alleged involvement of Party elders, and the long-term implications for the "CMC Chairman Responsibility System" and China’s strategic ambitions toward 2027.

Institutional Context of the January 2026 Purge

The removal of Zhang and Liu is not an isolated event but the culmination of an escalating cycle of purges that decimated the PLA’s upper echelons throughout 2024 and 2025. By early 2026, the membership of the Central Military Commission had been reduced to a fraction of its 2022 composition, creating a climate of extreme volatility within the military’s core decision-making body.

The October 2025 Precedents

The immediate precursor to the current crisis was the October 17, 2025, expulsion of General He Weidong and General Miao Hua. He Weidong, the second-ranking CMC Vice Chairman, and Miao Hua, the director of the CMC Political Work Department, were accused of "ideological collapse" and "disloyalty," phrases that signaled a departure from the purely economic allegations used in previous years. The downfall of these figures, alongside seven other generals primarily associated with the 31st Group Army and the so-called "Fujian clique," stripped the military of its primary administrative and ideological gatekeepers.

Date	Name	Rank/Position	Status/Outcome
Oct 2023	Li Shangfu	General, Defense Minister	Expelled; bribery
Jun 2024	Wei Fenghe	General, Former Defense Minister	Expelled; corruption

Date	Name	Rank/Position	Status/Outcome
Oct 2025	He Weidong	General, CMC Vice Chairman	Expelled; disloyalty
Oct 2025	Miao Hua	General, CMC Political Work Dir.	Expelled; corruption
Jan 2026	Zhang Youxia	General, CMC Vice Chairman	Under investigation
Jan 2026	Liu Zhenli	General, Chief of Joint Staff	Under investigation

The timeline indicates a systemic erosion of the 20th Party Congress military leadership. The investigation into Zhang Youxia is particularly significant because he was widely regarded as the ultimate loyalist, a "princeling" whose family ties to the top leadership stretched back to the revolutionary era.

The Role of the CMC Chairman Responsibility System

Central to the current crisis is the "CMC Chairman Responsibility System," a doctrine that mandates absolute, singular authority over the military reside with the Chairman. Official editorials in the PLA Daily following the Jan 24 announcement emphasized that Zhang and Liu had "seriously trampled on and undermined" this system. This phrasing suggests that the generals were not merely corrupt but were actively attempting to carve out an independent power base or restore a collective leadership model that would limit the Chairman's personal control.

The ideological foundation of the military has been shifted to emphasize "political mutual trust" and "political loyalty" as the primary metrics of fitness for command. The purge of Zhang and Liu effectively removes the last two members of the CMC who possessed both combat experience and an independent political lineage, leaving a command structure populated by those whose survival depends entirely on their adherence to the Chairman's directives.

Anatomy of the Alleged Coup Attempt

While state media maintains a facade of orderly disciplinary procedure, revelations from former officials and social media analysts describe a more violent and desperate internal struggle. According to accounts from Du Wen and other insiders, Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli orchestrated an attempted coup under the banner of "saving the Party and saving the nation" (救党救国).

The "Saving the Party" Narrative

The choice of the slogan "saving the Party" is historically resonant in Chinese political discourse, often used by those who believe the central leadership has deviated from the core principles of the CCP. Rumors suggest that Zhang and Liu, potentially supported by retired Party elders, viewed the extreme centralization of power as a threat to the Party's long-term survival and sought to return the country to the collective governance and reformist spirit of the Deng Xiaoping era.

This move was reportedly framed as a "soft coup" that turned hard as the opportunity to influence the top leadership through traditional channels vanished. The involvement of elders

such as Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao has been posited as a legitimizing force for this movement, though their inability to act decisively in late 2025 reportedly allowed the current counter-attack to materialize.

Operational Details and Betrayal

The mechanics of the coup attempt allegedly involved the mobilization of specific units within the PLA Ground Forces, particularly those with historical ties to Zhang Youxia's former commands. The plan reportedly relied on the General Staff Department to bypass official command orders and move troops toward Beijing under the guise of training exercises or emergency security.

- **The Leak:** The plan was reportedly compromised by a high-ranking deputy within the Joint Staff Department who informed the top leadership of the impending movement.
- **The Trap:** Xi Jinping is said to have orchestrated a counter-operation, using the Central Guard Unit (8341) and specialized security forces to intercept the conspirators at a critical meeting.
- **Mass Arrests:** Following the initial detention of Zhang and Liu, thousands of generals and high-ranking officers associated with their faction have reportedly been "taken under control" to prevent a coordinated military response.

The scale of this operation is described as exceeding the purges of Stalin and Mao, both in terms of the speed of execution and the thoroughness of the structural reorganization that followed.

Suspension of the Command and Control Hierarchy

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the January 2026 crisis is the reported total suspension of the traditional military command system. The General Staff Department, which has functioned as the brain of the PLA's operational activities since the 1950s, is said to have been effectively deactivated.

Direct Command via Encrypted Telegrams

In the absence of a trusted General Staff, command authority has been shifted directly to the Central Military Commission. Reports indicate that orders are now being issued directly to theater commands and individual group armies via "encrypted telegrams". This technological regression is a security measure designed to bypass the digital networks and command protocols that might still be influenced by Zhang and Liu's remaining loyalists.

This shift indicates a profound lack of trust in the intermediate layers of the military hierarchy. By using telegrams—a method less susceptible to modern cyber-interference or mass distribution than digital C4ISR systems—the top leadership is ensuring that every troop movement is manually authorized and strictly monitored from the center.

Operational Consequences of Hierarchy Collapse

The deactivation of the Joint Staff Department has led to what analysts describe as a "structural collapse" of the PLA's military readiness. The inability of theater commands to act independently or coordinate across services without direct central intervention severely degrades the PLA's modern "joint operations" capability.

1. **Paralysis of Decision-Making:** All military movements, including routine training and

logistical resupply, have been ordered to halt unless specifically authorized by a CMC telegram.

2. **Fragmented Communication:** The loss of a unified command network makes the military vulnerable to external aggression or internal mutiny, as units are isolated from one another and from their traditional superior officers.
3. **Security Dominance:** The "8341" Central Guard Unit and the Ministry of Public Security's elite Special Services Bureau have reportedly taken on a dominant role in managing military discipline, essentially treating the entire PLA as a suspect organization.

Level-1 Combat Readiness and the "Freeze" Protocol

Immediately following the failed coup attempt, the entire People's Liberation Army was placed on "Level-1 Combat Readiness". In standard military parlance, Level-1 is the highest state of alert, usually reserved for the eve of war. However, in the context of January 2026, this status has been redefined as a domestic security protocol.

The Domestic Nature of the Readiness

Unlike readiness levels triggered by external threats (such as the 2025 Taiwan Strait drills), the current Level-1 status is focused inward. The objective is to "freeze" the military in its current position to prevent any faction from launching a counter-strike.

- **Ammunition Control:** Reports suggest that while units are on alert, ammunition is not being issued to the rank-and-file, and armored vehicles have had their fuel supplies restricted.
- **Personnel Confinement:** All officers and soldiers have been ordered to remain in their barracks. Any unauthorized movement out of assigned districts is treated as an act of treason.
- **Communication Blackout:** In perhaps the most drastic measure, all military personnel have been required to hand in their mobile phones. This prevents the use of social media or encrypted messaging apps (like WeChat or Telegram) to coordinate movements or share information about the purge.

Centralized Political Study as Rectification

The "freeze" is accompanied by a mandate for "collective political study" (集中政治学习) across all units. This process is designed to reinforce the ideological supremacy of the Chairman and to force every officer to explicitly denounce Zhang and Liu. This technique, reminiscent of the "rectification" campaigns of the Yan'an era, serves as a psychological screening tool to identify those whose loyalty remains questionable.

Biographical Profiles: The Fall of the Veterans

The loss of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli is more than a political event; it is the loss of the PLA's most seasoned combat leaders. Both men represented a generation of officers who had actually seen frontline warfare, a rarity in the modern, peacetime PLA.

General Zhang Youxia: The Last Princeling General

Zhang Youxia, at 75, was the elder statesman of the PLA. His career was a blend of revolutionary pedigree and genuine military achievement. As the son of Zhang Zongxun, a close ally of Xi Jinping’s father, Zhang was once considered "un-purgeable".

Career Phase	Position/Action	Impact/Significance
1979	Sino-Vietnamese War	Combat experience as regimental officer
1984	Battle of Laoshan	Earned reputation as a "fighting general"
2012	General Armament Dept.	Oversaw military modernization and procurement
2017	CMC Vice Chairman	Highest-ranking uniformed officer in China
2022	CMC Vice Chairman (2nd Term)	Key ally in securing third term for Xi

Zhang’s oversight of weapons procurement and training meant he had deep tentacles into the technical branches of the military, including the Rocket Force and the newly formed Strategic Support Force. His removal suggests that even the most prestigious revolutionary background is no longer a shield against charges of political unreliability.

General Liu Zhenli

The Modern Tactician

Liu Zhenli, 61, was the youngest member of the CMC and the strategist responsible for the PLA’s joint operations. A scout during the Sino-Vietnamese border conflicts, Liu was a proponent of modernizing the PLA’s ground forces into a more mobile and technologically integrated force. His command of the 38th Group Army—the unit historically responsible for the security of Beijing—made him a pivotal figure in any internal power struggle. The fact that he was targeted alongside Zhang indicates that the purge has reached into the heart of the "Beijing defense" apparatus.

The Elder Faction and the "Soft Coup" Hypothesis

The involvement of Party elders adds a layer of complexity to the 2026 crisis. Jennifer Zeng and other analysts suggest that the purge of Zhang Youxia is a reaction to a "soft coup" attempt initiated by former leaders Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao.

The Beidaihe Legacy

Reports suggest that during the summer of 2025, a collective of elders led by Zeng Qinghong and others expressed grave concerns about the direction of the country, particularly regarding the stagnant economy and the risk of war over Taiwan. These elders reportedly sought to use

their remaining influence to force a partial handover of power or a return to collective decision-making.

Zhang Youxia was allegedly the bridge between the military and these civilian elders. However, the elders reportedly "missed their opportunity" to act decisively when the top leadership was vulnerable in late 2025. This hesitation allowed the Chairman to regroup and launch the current counter-offensive, which is now characterized as a "reverse purge" against anyone who showed even passive support for the elders' initiative.

The Theory of "Political Illness"

Rumors of Xi Jinping being hospitalized in mid-January 2026 for a "political illness" or even being under de facto house arrest surfaced briefly. These reports now appear to have been part of the fog of war during the coup attempt. If the Chairman did enter the 301 Hospital, it may have been the catalyst for Zhang and Liu to attempt their move, thinking the leadership was incapacitated. The subsequent re-emergence of the Chairman and the immediate arrest of the generals suggest that the hospitalization may have been a ruse to draw out the conspirators.

Geopolitical Implications

Taiwan 2027 and the Trade War

The internal instability in Beijing has immediate and profound consequences for China's international standing, particularly its stated goal of being "capable" of a Taiwan reunification by 2027.

The 2027 Timeline Under Threat

The removal of Zhang and Liu decapitates the military leadership exactly one year before the critical 2027 window. Zhang was the primary architect of the modernization program, while Liu was the man responsible for the "joint operations" necessary for a cross-strait invasion.

- **Readiness Decay:** The current Level-1 "freeze" and the suspension of the General Staff mean that training for complex naval blockades and amphibious landings has likely halted.
- **Procurement Crisis:** The investigation into Zhang, who led the equipment department for years, likely reveals systemic failures or corruption in the very weapons systems (missiles, aircraft carriers) required for a Taiwan campaign.
- **Loss of Trust:** The purge signals to the world—and to the PLA rank-and-file—that the leadership does not trust its own generals to execute a war. This loss of trust may force a postponement of any military action against Taiwan.

The Trump Tariffs and the Carney Visit

The crisis is also unfolding during a period of intense economic pressure. The return of Donald Trump to the White House in early 2026 has led to threats of 100% tariffs on Canada over its trade deals with China. The visit of Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney to Beijing in mid-January was an attempt by China to find economic lifelines as the US relationship deteriorated.

Event	Date	Significance
Carney Visit to Beijing	Jan 14-17, 2026	Attempt to secure "Strategic Partnership" with G7 nation
Trump Tariff Threat	Jan 24, 2026	US pressure on allies to decouple from China
Zhang/Liu Purge	Jan 24, 2026	Internal crisis coinciding with maximum external pressure

The coincidence of the purge with these external shocks suggests that the internal struggle may be partially driven by disagreements over how to handle the economic crisis. Factions within the military and the Party may believe that the current confrontational path is leading to national ruin, fueling the "save the Party" sentiment reported by Du Wen.

Security and Stability in Beijing

The Chang'an Avenue Lockdown

The atmosphere in Beijing remains extremely tense. Information from former officials advised residents to avoid the "Chang'an Avenue area," the central artery that runs past Zhongnanhai and Tiananmen Square.

Unprecedented Security Measures

- Reports indicate that Beijing is under an "unprecedented security lockdown". This includes:
- 1. **Checkpoints and Screening:** New security screens have been erected around key areas like Wangfujing and along Chang'an Avenue.
 - 2. **Airspace Restrictions:** A total drone ban has been implemented across multiple districts, and military helicopters are reportedly conducting 24-hour patrols over the city.
 - 3. **Troop Mutiny Fears:** The warning to avoid central Beijing is based on the fear that "large-scale troop mutinies" could break out if units loyal to Zhang Youxia attempt to storm the capital to liberate their commanders.

The use of the Central Guard Unit (8341) to secure the city highlights the fact that the standard military police (People's Armed Police) are no longer trusted with the security of the top leadership. This creates a situation where the capital is essentially a fortress, isolated from the very military that is supposed to protect it.

Economic and Strategic Objectives

The 15th Five-Year Plan

Despite the internal chaos, the state media continues to project a message of "business as usual" regarding the economy. On January 20, 2026, President Xi addressed a study session

emphasizing a "good start" for the 15th Five-Year Plan.

Strategic Uncertainty and Risk

In his speech, Xi noted that China is at a stage where "strategic opportunities and risks coexist, with increasing uncertainty". This acknowledgment of risk is likely a coded reference to the internal instability. The focus on "developing advanced manufacturing vigorously" and maintaining a "high-pressure stance against corruption" suggests that the leadership views the military purge as a necessary "cleansing" to ensure that the 15th Five-Year Plan is not sabotaged by internal rivals.

The target economic output of RMB 140 trillion and the focus on "Chinese modernization" are the ultimate goals of the current administration. The purge of the military leadership is intended to ensure that the PLA is a compliant tool in achieving these goals, rather than an independent actor that could challenge the Party's economic directives.

Historical Precedents

Stalin, Mao, and Lin Biao

The scale and intensity of the 2026 purge have invited comparisons to the most brutal periods of Communist history. Du Wen's assertion that the purge "far exceeds those of Stalin and Mao Zedong" is based on the structural nature of the reorganization.

Comparison of Purge Methodologies

Metric	Stalin (1937)	Mao (Cultural Rev)	Xi (2026)
Primary Target	Tukhachevsky (General Staff)	Lin Biao (Vice Chair)	Zhang/Liu (Vice Chair/Staff)
Mechanism	Show trials/Execution	Plane crash/Denunciation	"Serious violations"/Lockdown
Technological Control	NKVD surveillance	Red Guard mobilization	CMC Telegrams/Mobile ban
Outcome	Decapitation of Red Army	Paralysis of PLA	Structural collapse of Joint Staff

The 2026 purge is unique in its use of modern technological control to enforce a pre-modern command hierarchy. By stripping officers of their mobile phones and reverting to telegrams, the leadership has achieved a level of granular control that even Stalin or Mao could not manage. This "digital totalitarianism" applied to the military command makes a successful counter-coup extremely difficult, as the ability of conspirators to communicate is effectively zero.

The Russia Factor

APT31 and Strategic Trust

The internal purge also impacts China's relationship with its most important strategic partner, Russia. Recent disclosures of Chinese hacking (APT31) targeting Russian defense firms show that even as the two powers align against the West, their relationship is "conditional" and lacks "strategic trust".

The purge of Zhang Youxia—who was a key interlocutor with Russian military officials—likely adds to Moscow's anxiety. If the PLA is in a state of "structural collapse," its value as a partner in challenging NATO is significantly reduced. Furthermore, the internal instability in Beijing may make the leadership more cautious on the global stage, as it focuses on domestic survival, potentially leaving Russia more isolated in its conflict with the West.

Prognosis

The Future of the CCP Regime

The purge of Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli marks the beginning of a new, more dangerous phase of CCP governance. The "terror balance" between the Party and the military has been broken in favor of a totalizing civilian control that relies on fear rather than institutional consensus.

Potential Scenarios

1. **Successful Consolidation:** The leadership successfully suppresses all remnants of the Zhang faction, replaces the CMC with total loyalists, and moves forward with the 15th Five-Year Plan and the 2027 Taiwan goals. However, the military remains operationally weakened due to the loss of expertise.
2. **Extended Mutiny:** Pockets of resistance within the ground forces or the equipment departments launch localized mutinies, leading to a period of internal civil strife or a "warlord" scenario where central authority is challenged in the provinces.
3. **The "Lin Biao" Effect:** The purge leads to such a profound loss of morale and professional competence within the PLA that it ceases to be an effective fighting force for a generation, effectively ending China's ambitions for regional hegemony.

The immediate priority for the leadership is the "collective political study" and the enforcement of the "freeze" status. As long as the mobile phones remain confiscated and the encrypted telegrams remain the only mode of command, the leadership holds the upper hand. However, the underlying tensions—economic stagnation, the "save the Party" sentiment, and the influence of disgruntled elders—remain unresolved.

Final Conclusions

The January 2026 purge of General Zhang Youxia and General Liu Zhenli represents the most significant internal crisis for the Chinese Communist Party since 1971. The intersection of an alleged coup attempt, a total command hierarchy suspension, and an unprecedented military lockdown indicates a regime at war with its own primary instrument of power. While official media frames the event as an anti-corruption victory, the reality is a structural rupture that threatens the PLA's 2027 readiness and the Party's long-term stability.

The move against Zhang Youxia, the ultimate princeling loyalist, signals that no revolutionary

pedigree can protect an officer from the demands of absolute, singular loyalty to the Chairman. As China navigates the 15th Five-Year Plan and a hostile international environment marked by trade wars and strategic mistrust, the 2026 purge will be remembered as the moment the Party chose total control over professional military stability. The consequences of this choice—for Taiwan, for the global economy, and for the survival of the CCP—will unfold in the critical months and years ahead. Residents of Beijing and international observers alike must remain vigilant as the potential for sudden political upheaval remains at its highest level in modern history.

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