

## What's going on inside Xi Jinping's military purge?

On 26 November, the *Financial Times* [named](#) China's Defence Minister, Dong Jun (董军), as the latest high-ranking military official under investigation for corruption, adding to a growing list of targeted military leaders and officials. If true, this would make him the third consecutive defence minister to face such a fate. The following day, however, China's Defence Ministry announced at its [monthly press conference](#) that Miao Hua (苗华), a member of the Central Military Commission (CMC) who outranks the defence minister, was under investigation.

According to [reports](#), the spokesperson confirmed that Dong remains in his position and dismissed rumours of an investigation as "sheer fabrication". The Foreign Ministry also denied the rumours, describing them as "[shadow chasing](#)". In neither case, however, were these denials included in the official transcript of the press conference. Although noteworthy, this should not be seen as an indication that Dong is in trouble, as it is not unusual for such transcripts to omit certain comments or answers, especially when they address sensitive or controversial topics.

Given what we know about politics in Xi Jinping's China, and the limited information available about these cases, what conclusions can realistically be drawn about what is happening and why, and the implications for China's future?

### **The military purge continues and could be expanded**

The Miao Hua case adds to a long list of high-ranking military officials and ministers who have been investigated and dismissed since the spring of 2023, which began with the disappearance and subsequent dismissal of Foreign Minister Qin Gang (秦刚) in July 2023 after only a few months in office. A short time later, it was announced that two generals had been dismissed from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) rocket force – Li Yuchao (李玉超), the commander of the force, and Xu Zhongbo (徐忠波), its political commissar.

In October 2023, Li Shangfu (李尚福), the defence minister and fourth-ranked member of the CMC, was also removed from his post. In December the same year, nine generals [were expelled](#) from the National People's Congress, China's legislature, five of whom were current or former members of the rocket force.

In addition to these changes, Cheng Dongfang (程东方) [was dismissed](#) from his position as president of the PLA's military court after just eight months in office. Purges within the rocket force continued over the summer of 2024, and in July its chief of staff [was expelled](#) for corruption. The purge has probably resulted in the removal of or withholding of promotion from many more individuals whose cases have not been made public.

Miao Hua's downfall means that the military purge shows no signs of slowing down. His case is likely to trigger further investigations, perhaps targeting Miao's associates in the PLA Navy (PLAN), among whom Dong Jun is a notable figure.

### **The “black box” of Chinese politics has got darker**

The secrecy surrounding these cases has been exceptionally high, even by the standards of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The lack of information is particularly striking because some of the dismissed officials were ministers with substantial international profiles. Despite their prominence, they were simply allowed to “disappear” without explanation.

The cases surrounding the rocket force and Li Shangfu have since become somewhat clearer. Li was charged with corruption in the summer and former defence minister Wei Fenghe (魏凤和) faced similar accusations. Rumours surrounding Qin Gang's removal suggest a range of potential causes, from ethical transgressions, such as an [extramarital affair](#), to more serious accusations of espionage and [leaking nuclear secrets](#). The woman believed to be involved, news correspondent Fu Xiaotian (傅晓田), has not been seen in public since around the same time as Qin's disappearance, lending some credence to the rumours of an affair.

Some theories combine these elements, speculating that Fu could have been an intelligence asset who used her relationship with Qin to gain access to sensitive military information, which she passed on to foreign intelligence services. These suspicions were fuelled by a November 2023 article from the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the Party's anti-corruption watchdog, which [warned of](#) the high risks of infiltration and corruption faced by foreign affairs officials, particularly in their dealings with western “hostile forces”. Supporters of the espionage theory [argue that](#) extramarital affairs are common among Chinese officials, and that such personal misconduct alone would be unlikely to lead to removal from office.

Given the relatively mild punishment Qin appears to have received, it would seem more likely that his infraction was a violation of party discipline rather than something as serious as espionage. Former US officials have [claimed that](#) following his removal, Qin was reassigned to a Beijing publishing house while awaiting retirement, although this has not been confirmed. Others have suggested that this could be a misunderstanding, speculating that the person assigned to the publisher might simply share the same name. Despite losing his official positions, Qin continues to be [referred to as “comrade”](#), implying that he retained his CCP membership.

Arguably, it is improbable that Qin could have leaked military secrets, given that as foreign minister, he was unlikely to have been involved in military matters, or to have had access to sensitive military information unless it was passed to him by someone with such clearance. In the realm of foreign policy, he was outranked by Wang Yi (王毅), who chairs the CCP foreign affairs commission and, unlike Qin, has a seat on the Politburo.

The most plausible explanation is perhaps that Qin and Fu had an affair. Espionage allegations against Fu raised concerns that Qin might have been compromised in some way, triggering an investigation into him. The [removal](#) of all information about Qin's activities on the Foreign Ministry's website, followed by their [reinstatement](#) just days later, could suggest that the leadership was uncertain about the seriousness of his offense and decided to await the outcome of the investigation. Ultimately, the investigation found no evidence of espionage on Qin's part, resulting in a relatively lenient punishment.

## **The purge raises alarm over problems in the PLA**

The cases of the fallen generals highlight how pervasive and deeply entrenched Xi Jinping perceives the problems in the military to be. Notably, Miao Hua, as director of the CMC's political work department, was responsible for ideological work within the PLA. This raises the question of whether these cases primarily involve corruption or reflect broader concerns about disloyalty to Xi Jinping, although these are certainly not mutually exclusive.

Remarkably, the removal of Li Shangfu and suspension of Miao Hua means that the CMC is currently operating with just two regular members instead of the usual four. Alongside these two, the commission comprises a Chair (Xi himself) and two vice-chairs.

The immediate impact of the ongoing purge on the military readiness and operational capability of the PLA is difficult to assess. This partly depends on the true reasons for the officials' removal – which may never be fully known – as well as the loyalty of the remaining generals. At the very least, the purge is likely to temporarily weaken the PLA's capacity to carry out Xi's orders effectively.

## **The relevance of patronage is unclear**

The ties between Miao Hua and Xi Jinping [date back](#) to the 1990s and early 2000s, when they both served in Fujian province. Miao's downfall [has been described](#) as a case of Xi taking down one of his protégés. Although it is not new for Xi to remove people he appointed himself and who were considered Xi loyalists, Miao's case shows that he is willing to target individuals with personal connections that date back decades.

However, it is also possible that Xi and Miao were not that close. After all, decades have passed since they worked together in Fujian. Any affection between them may have weakened over time, and the degree to which their networks have overlapped or created mutual interests is unclear. This begs the question of whether such relationships still have significance and whether the term “protégé” has been overused to describe connections that may not have been that strong in the first place.

Could Xi's power have weakened to the point where he can no longer protect his protégés? While it is important not to take Xi's authority for granted, it seems far more likely that he remains firmly in control of the purge. Xi has spent the past decade placing loyalists in key positions throughout the system. It seems highly unlikely that the CCDI would target a senior military official in the absence of an explicit instruction from Xi or his approval.

## **The military purge aims to secure loyalty and readiness amid growing geopolitical tensions**

Xi's actions appear rooted in concerns that corruption and disloyalty are so pervasive and systemic within the military that they threaten to undermine China's strategic goals. [Chief among these is](#) achieving a “modernized military” by 2035 and developing a “world-class military” capable of “fighting and winning wars” by 2049.

Judging by the scale of the purge and the way it is being handled – with forced disappearances and a near-total lack of transparency – Xi appears willing to accept short-term pain, disorder and even embarrassment in pursuit of his long-term objectives. Xi might also be driven by a sense of urgency, as he probably believes that geopolitical conditions are deteriorating, and that the possibility of a clash with the US over Taiwan or in the South China Sea is increasing.

## The cost of secrecy

The CCP is notoriously secretive about its internal affairs, which often leads to the sudden removal of officials without explanation – often leaving China watchers to piece together potential clues about what might have occurred. Under Xi's highly centralized leadership, this challenge extends not only to outside observers, but increasingly also to political elites outside of Xi's immediate circle.

As for Xi's motives and the reasons behind the current removals, we can only make educated guesses. Navigating the swirl of rumours is no easy task, and this is perhaps intended. Sowing confusion with a flood of contradictory rumours ensures that no single narrative can dominate.

What does seem apparent, however, is that the issues within the PLA are perceived as deeply serious. The military purge shows no sign of slowing down and may now be extended to the PLAN. Whether Xi's efforts to reshape the military will be successful remains unclear. However, in the absence of greater transparency, public accountability and oversight by an independent press, it is unlikely that a staff overhaul will address the root causes of corruption. Corruption has been a systemic challenge within the CCP from its inception and is highly likely to persist.



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### About NKK

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