

THE ZHANG YOUXIA PURGE AND TAIWAN'S SECURITY: NAVIGATING INCREASED UNPREDICTABILITY IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT?

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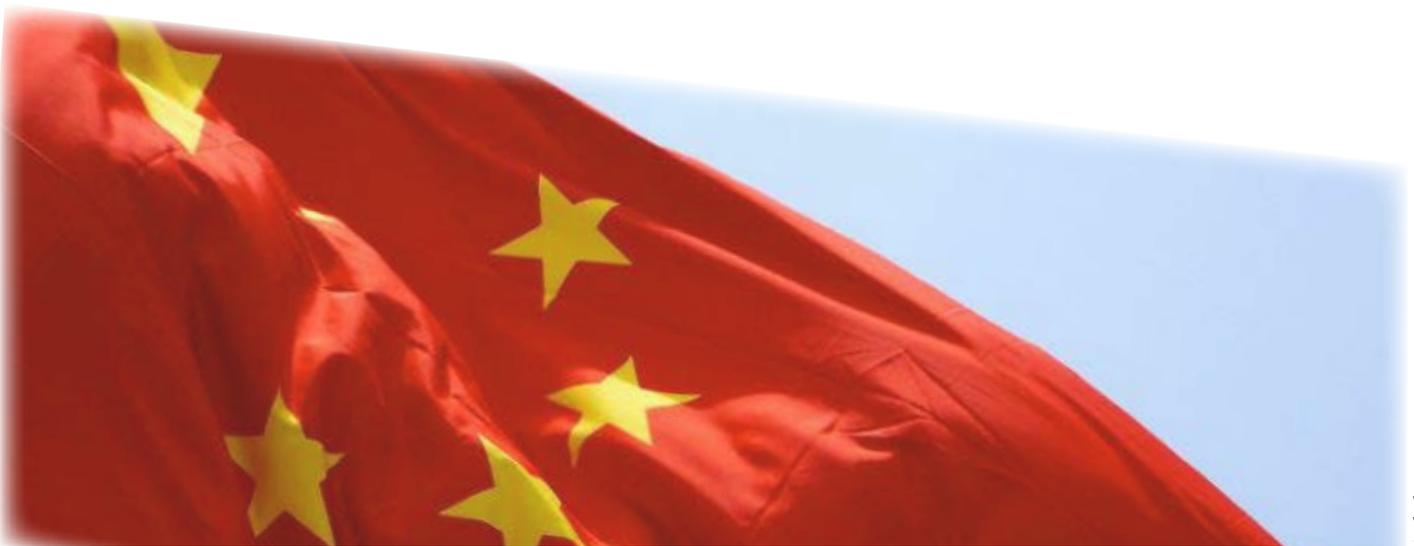


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The January 2026 investigations of senior Central Military Commission figures, including Generals Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli, have left China's top military leadership unusually centralized under Xi Jinping. While this disruption in the People's Liberation Army might suggest reduced operational capacity, it paradoxically increases risks for Taiwan. Leadership purges erode institutional knowledge, fostering miscalculation and unpredictable decision-making. Newly elevated officers may prioritize loyalty and assertiveness, encouraging risk-prone strategies. Simultaneously, Beijing could exploit global instability to intensify diplomatic, economic, and gray-zone pressure. This volatile environment complicates Taiwan's security landscape, presenting a multifaceted threat beyond conventional invasion. In response, Taiwan must strengthen defense capabilities, societal resilience, and internal unity while coordinating with allies to deter escalation. Clear international signaling is essential to counter potential misjudgments from an increasingly centralized yet less experienced Chinese military leadership.

Introduction

On January 24, 2026, China's Ministry of National Defense announced that Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia (張又俠) and CMC Joint Staff Department Chief of Staff General Liu Zhenli (劉振立) were placed under investigation for 'serious violations of discipline and law.'¹ Such investigations typically sideline officials immediately, leaving Xi Jinping with only one active

figure on the CMC: Vice Chairman Zhang Shengmin (張升民). This creates an unusually centralized and potentially brittle apex command structure.² For Taiwan, this development presents a dangerous paradox: a People's Liberation Army (PLA) that may be weaker in near-term cohesion yet potentially more dangerous due to increased unpredictability and assertiveness.

Intuitively, one might think that the military purges provide Taiwan with breathing space, as a disorganized PLA leadership struggling with command chaos should be less capable of executing complex cross-strait operations. After all, the purges directly affect the leadership that has had the most experience and expertise regarding a Taiwan contingency. Contrary to intuition, Taiwan might be at heightened risk because the PLA's initial disorganization could lead to reckless behavior and create a volatile environment where miscalculation and escalation risks increase.

This issue brief examines four critical dimensions of how the PLA purges affect Taiwan's security. First, increased operational unpredictability due to the loss of institutional knowledge creates miscalculation risks that could trigger unintended escalation. Second, the "loyalty demonstration" imperative drives new officers toward aggressive recommendations that favor risk-acceptant advice over careful assessment. Third, Beijing's exploitation of global geopolitical instability enables diplomatic isolation and alliance disruption during the window of PLA reorganization. Fourth, it assesses the challenges and opportunities Taiwan faces in navigating the interregnum of a disorganized PLA.

Loss of Taiwan-Specific Operational Expertise

The first dimension relates to the most immediate consequence of recent purges within the PLA: the destruction of institutional knowledge related to Taiwan operations. Officers removed from the former 31st Group Army and the Eastern Theater Command formed the core of the military's Taiwan-focused planning community. Many had spent decades preparing for joint amphibious operations, blockade scenarios, and cross-domain campaigns tailored to Taiwan's geography, defenses, and escalation dynamics. Their removal does not merely create leadership vacancies; it dismantles command networks with deep familiarity in Taiwan contingencies.³ At the start of 2023, at least 30 high-ranking generals were heading key departments and commands. By February 2026,

that number had fallen to seven generals, marking the decimation of military knowledge.⁴

The Eastern Theater Command has been particularly affected. He Weidong (何卫东),⁵ its former commander before elevation to the Central Military Commission, was purged in 2025. His professional network, which was rooted in the former Nanjing Military Region and heavily composed of naval and amphibious specialists, had spent years refining landing and blockade concepts. His successor, Lin Xianyang (林向阳), emerged from the same Taiwan-focused ecosystem before his own removal. Together, these purges erased much of the command continuity underpinning Taiwan planning.

This systematic dismantling of Taiwan-experienced leadership creates a vacuum precisely where expertise is most critical. Officers who studied Taiwan's military modernization, asymmetric defenses, urban terrain, and political resilience through repeated exercises and planning cycles have largely been removed. Even politically reliable replacements lack the depth of Taiwan-specific familiarity developed over decades. In other words, the primary danger is not incompetence but miscalculation. Less experienced commanders may overestimate readiness or conflate technological modernization with operational effectiveness, relying on optimistic internal assessments rather than sober evaluations of joint integration, logistics, and escalation thresholds.⁶ Amphibious warfare against a defended island is among the most complex military operations imaginable; urban combat in Taipei would bear little resemblance to controlled training scenarios.

Repeated purges at senior levels also narrow the space for candid advice. When careers and potentially personal safety depend on alignment with leadership expectations, frank assessments of operational risk become less likely. The question is no longer simply whether the PLA can execute a blockade or amphibious assault, but whether anyone is willing to argue that such operations may be logistically unsustainable, politically escalatory, or strategically premature.

Historical precedents illustrate the danger. Saddam Hussein in 2003 believed his forces would perform far better than they did, partly because subordinates feared delivering honest assessments. Soviet military capabilities in Afghanistan were systematically overestimated by officers afraid to report problems. Argentina's military junta in 1982 fundamentally misread British resolve over the Falklands. China risks similar delusions. In each case, leadership acted on flawed internal assessments reinforced by institutional incentives.⁷

China risks a similar dynamic. Disruption of established command relationships, particularly within the Eastern Theater Command, necessitates adaptation under conditions that favor optimism over experience. Even if candid advice was never assured under Xi Jinping, the probability of dissenting operational assessments has likely declined further under a newly reshuffled and politically cautious leadership corps.

For Taiwan, this implies confronting a PLA command structure that may genuinely believe certain operations are feasible when seasoned planners might have judged them excessively risky. The greater danger may not be a meticulously prepared invasion executed by confident professionals, but a poorly calibrated operation launched by leaders who misunderstand the operational environment and escalation dynamics, raising the risk of a crisis spiraling beyond Beijing's initial intentions.

Aggressive Advice as Career Insurance

A second and equally critical dimension concerns incentives. Newly elevated officers face strong pressure to demonstrate political loyalty in a climate where even senior figures are vulnerable. The purge of high-ranking leaders, including individuals long viewed as close to top leadership, signals that personal networks and past credentials offer limited protection. The case of Zhang Youxia,⁸ supposedly Xi's closest military ally, is cautionary.⁹ In such an environment, cautious, risk-averse advice carries reputational danger. Highlighting

operational weaknesses or emphasizing escalation risks can be interpreted as pessimism or lack of confidence in modernization efforts. By contrast, presenting bold operational concepts, blockade options, rapid strike campaigns, or decapitation scenarios, signals initiative and alignment with national objectives.

Career incentives, therefore, tilt toward optimistic capability assessments. Officers may downplay logistical constraints, overstate joint integration, or minimize the likelihood of U.S. and Japanese involvement. They may frame Taiwan-related actions as time-sensitive, suggesting that a "window of opportunity" is narrowing. Such arguments are not necessarily fabricated, but they are structurally encouraged.

This dynamic complicates deterrence. Traditional deterrence theory assumes rational cost-benefit calculations based on accurate information. If internal assessments systematically inflate PLA readiness and understate escalation risks (and if leadership accepts those assessments), then Taiwan's defensive preparations may not register as credible deterrent signals.

To counter this twofold challenge, Taiwan must visibly strengthen defense capabilities in ways that cannot easily be dismissed as symbolic. In addition, it must signal resolve and the likelihood of coalition involvement without provoking premature escalation. Clear indicators of resilience, military modernization, civil defense preparations, and sustained international partnerships, raise the expected costs of aggression. At the same time, excessive signaling or abrupt political moves could reinforce perceptions among ambitious officers that the strategic environment is deteriorating, thereby accelerating calls for action.

Deterring an overconfident adversary is more difficult than deterring a cautious one. If internal PLA incentives reward aggressive planning and optimistic reporting, Beijing may face decisions shaped less by experienced operational judgment than by political loyalty. That combination, reduced expertise and

skewed incentives, heightens the risk of miscalculation in the Taiwan Strait.

Exploiting Geopolitical Instability: The Window of Distraction

Although the series of purges weakens the PLA's capacity to efficiently and effectively take over Taiwan by force in the short term, it also presents an opportunity for Beijing to exploit global geopolitical instability to advance "reunification." The current international environment presents Beijing with opportunities created by competing crises and limited political bandwidth in many capitals.

The U.S., Taiwan's closest ally, announced its 2026 National Defense Strategy highlighting simultaneous priorities ranging from homeland and hemispheric issues to Indo-Pacific deterrence while emphasizing "burden-sharing" among partners and a strategy of denial defense.¹⁰ These emphases could constrain sustained focus on any single contingency, and the U.S. notably omitted Taiwan from the strategy. This strategic silence on Taiwan leaves space for Beijing to test, probe, and identify new U.S. "normal" baselines regarding Chinese incursions. Beijing will carefully observe whether U.S. security commitments hold under pressure or prove rhetorical rather than operational.

The initial U.S. policy of "strategic ambiguity" has historically aimed to deter both unilateral Taiwanese moves toward formal independence and Chinese aggression by preserving uncertainty regarding direct U.S. military intervention. However, this ambiguity is effective only when it maintains credible uncertainty. If declaratory restraint is not matched by visible operational preparedness and alliance coordination, ambiguity risks evolving into strategic vagueness. In a context where PLA internal assessments may already be distorted by loyalty-driven incentives and overconfidence, reduced clarity in U.S. signaling could be misinterpreted in Beijing as declining resolve rather than deliberate restraint. Accordingly, two competing interpretations emerge: one viewing

Washington's omission of Taiwan as calibrated prudence, while the other suggests that, amid global crises, it may embolden testing behavior. If Beijing perceives alliance cohesion as uncertain or politically fragile, it may intensify gray-zone activities to probe thresholds without crossing them.

On the European Union (EU) and Japan front, the EU passed resolutions in early 2026 to encourage more security cooperation and exchange between the EU and Taiwan, while signaling the potential to increase its military presence in the Indo-Pacific region.¹¹ However, it is important to note that the EU and its member-states are unlikely to serve as frontline military support in a Taiwan contingency. Nevertheless, their economic weight and regulatory power make them critical deterrence multipliers, as the bloc has built legal tools and is investing in reducing its dependence to China. Meanwhile, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks hinting at a potential mobilization of the Self-Defense Forces in a Taiwan contingency have worsened Tokyo-Beijing relations.¹² The growing ties between the EU and Taiwan, and rising tensions between China and Japan, allow Taiwan to gain more support from its allies. Yet these dynamics may also allow Beijing to exploit tensions further to justify and pursue Xi's "unification dream."

Moreover, the Trump administration's drastic changes to tariff and foreign policy have weakened alliances between the U.S. and its partners. Beijing could take advantage of this disruption by offering economic inducements to potential coalition members while creating bilateral deals that undermine multilateral solidarity. This strategy recognizes that preventing a coordinated response is easier than overcoming united opposition. Beijing will also continue positioning itself as indispensable to global supply chains while making economic costs of supporting Taiwan prohibitive.

In this context, Beijing can create a *fait accompli* that further normalizes countries' economic, military and infrastructural dependencies in ways that are beneficial to Beijing's global ambition and difficult to reverse. What appears as normal collaboration between China

and other countries today could become detrimental to Taiwan's security tomorrow, and defending against China's growing influence may appear as escalation rather than the maintenance of the *status quo*.

Taiwan's Challenges and Opportunities in Navigating the Interregnum

How much can Beijing achieve through non-military means while the PLA reorganizes? If Xi can substantially weaken Taiwan's international position, erode its economic viability and normalize high levels of Chinese control across countries, all while the PLA rebuilds, the consequences could be severe once PLA capabilities recover. The strategic objective should be to use this window to strengthen international commitments to security and stability in the Taiwan Strait, build irreversible defense partnerships and capabilities, demonstrate Taiwan's value to global security architecture, create economic interdependencies that raise costs of conflict, and develop societal resilience against multi-domain pressure. Missing this window would mean facing a reorganized, capable PLA in an international environment Beijing has reshaped to its advantage.

Challenges in Societal and Governmental Perspectives

Taiwan must maintain defensive readiness even amid PLA disorganization. The assumption of breathing space could prove fatal when inexperienced commanders are more, not less, likely to miscalculate, and gray-zone campaigns continue to intensify. Taiwan's defensive preparations must continue adapting to this reality, focusing not just on countering invasion scenarios but on building resilience against sustained, multi-domain coercion. Taiwan's current strategies—including increasing the defense budget, building all-out defense mobilization capacity, promoting civil defense concepts, strengthening societal resilience, and deepening international partnerships—are intended to counter Beijing's gray-zone incursions and potential blockade or invasion.

Although Taiwan is building a comprehensive defense mechanism spanning both military capabilities and societal resilience, it is crucial to recognize the existing divisions in Taiwan's social and political cohesion, as illustrated by the following examples.

Taiwan's GDP growth in 2025 reached 8.63 percent, the highest in the past 15 years, reflecting strong economic performance largely driven by increased demand for artificial intelligence and semiconductors.¹³ This growth may seem positive for Taiwan's role in the global economy, yet, beneath it, Taiwan faces growing income imbalance which casts a shadow on societal cohesion in an already politically polarized society. In 2025, the average monthly wage in Taiwan reached a record high of US\$1,512 while the number of people who earn less than the average has been increasing over the past four years, reaching nearly 70 percent.¹⁴ This widening disparity poses a threat to social cohesion among the people of Taiwan.

On the political front, the Lai administration has been struggling to gain full support from the Legislative Yuan on different types of budgets since assuming office in 2024. For instance, it has faced continuous setbacks in the legal review process of a special defense budget in the Legislative Yuan from late 2025 to early 2026, indicating deep political divisions within the government.¹⁵ To break the deadlock, Lai had to call for unity by inviting all five Yuan leaders to a closed-door meeting.¹⁶ Additionally, in mid-2025, the "Great Recall Movement" backed by the Lai administration sought to unseat more than 30 legislators, most of whom were members of the Kuomintang (KMT).¹⁷ The movement proved to be a complete failure for Lai, highlighting a deeply polarized society unable to reach consensus. These incidents underscore the fragility and uncertainty of political alignments, revealing divisions within both the public and the government that remain far from cohesive.

The examples of growing financial inequality among Taiwanese people and persistent political

disagreements leave space for Beijing to further intensify its psychological warfare and other forms of gray-zone campaigns to exploit divisions in Taiwan during the PLA reorganization. This could jeopardize progress in building defense capacities and societal resilience. With a temporarily weakened PLA, Taiwan should take the opportunity to unite the island to strengthen its resilience against Beijing's multi-domain pressure and potential invasion while also reevaluating its economic system to improve economy security and reduce political and social fragmentation.

The Criticality of Building International Partnerships

While Beijing reorganizes the PLA, Taiwan should enhance its efforts to secure international partnerships. What is established during this period may prove difficult for Beijing to reverse later. Taiwan must move aggressively during this window rather than assuming it will remain open indefinitely. To signal the high cost of a Taiwan contingency—and to penetrate the echo chamber of optimistic PLA assessments reaching Xi—Taiwan and its international allies must seek ways to inject greater realism into Chinese decision-making. A materialized, cohesive international coalition supporting Taiwan would make the likelihood on an intervention unlikely.

Taiwan's allies such as the U.S., Europe and Japan must account for the possibility of Chinese miscalculation driven by flawed information rather than deliberate risk acceptance. During this period, as Xi rebuilds the PLA and intensifies gray-zone operations, Taiwan's allies should counter Beijing's coercion through military presence, economic integration with Taiwan, diplomatic support for Taiwan's international participation, counter-information operations, and coalition building. Building coalition resilience through coordinated responses among the U.S., Japan, European partners, and regional allies creates comprehensive resistance to pressure that Beijing cannot simply overcome through bilateral coercion. Fragmenting potential coalitions is easier than overcoming united opposition; therefore, coalition

solidarity becomes central to effective deterrence. This requires sustained diplomatic engagement, economic coordination, and security cooperation that goes beyond traditional bilateral relationships.

Clarity about the likelihood of international intervention, alliance coordination and support, and the costs of action may be more important during this period than in times of Chinese military confidence. Using the window of PLA weakness to establish clear, irreversible security commitments to Taiwan can help constrain future Chinese calculations.

Conclusion

Taiwan faces not only a threat from PLA disorganization but also a reconfigured threat matrix that may be more challenging than confronting a military invasion alone. This threat matrix allows Beijing to test commitments, disrupts potential alliances, and creates conditions favorable to future action while PLA capability remains degraded.

Unpredictable military behavior creates heightened miscalculation risks, as inexperienced and career-aggressive PLA commanders, lacking institutional knowledge, may recommend operations based on flawed assessments of capability and risk. The echo chamber of officers then creates a systematic bias toward action over caution, raising unpredictability in Taiwan Strait. This unpredictability is further exacerbated by global geopolitical instability, which provides space for Beijing to reshape the international environment while it continuously imposes multi-domain pressure through gray-zone campaigns, including coordinated economic, diplomatic, information, and cyber operations to destabilize the situation.

The increasing unpredictability of PLA's behavior toward Taiwan highlights the importance of Taiwan continuing to build its capabilities in national defense and societal resilience. Taipei's plan to further increase its defense budget and its stronger emphasis on building resilience across society prove that Taiwan is on track to defend itself from Beijing's multi-domain

gray zone incursions and potential invasion. However, it is critical to point out the divisions in Taipei, and Taiwanese society as a whole. These divisions present opportunities for Beijing to insert its influence into Taiwan through gray-zone operations, which Taipei must promptly address. In addition, to complement Taiwan's security policy, it is pivotal to convey strategic realities to Xi, who may be surrounded by inexperienced and career-driven officers. Taiwan and its allies should present a materialized, cohesive international coalition to demonstrate that the likelihood of an international intervention in a Taiwan contingency is beyond doubt.

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