

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Death Sentences to Former Chinese Defence Ministers: Xi Jinping Cracks Down on PLA Corruption

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S*ummary*

Xi Jinping has been using the anti-corruption drive against PLA officers to deal with disloyal personnel or rival factions.

On 7 May 2026, former Chinese defence ministers Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu were sentenced to death by the Military Court of China.¹ It marks the first time such a sentence has been handed down to defence ministers in the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).² The severity of the verdict also surpasses the life imprisonment imposed on Guo Boxiong, former Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and Fang Fenghui, former Chief of the Joint Staff Department. The two former defence ministers will be permanently deprived of their political rights, and all their personal assets have been ordered confiscated.³

Under Chinese law, the ‘Suspension of Death Sentence or Death with Reprieve’ is a unique system for the application of the death penalty. It generally applies to criminals who merit the death penalty but whose execution is not deemed immediately necessary. Such individuals are sentenced to death, but with a simultaneous declaration that the execution is suspended for a period of two years.⁴ Usually, a death sentence with a two-year reprieve may be commuted to life imprisonment if the convicted person does not commit an intentional crime during the reprieve period. In practice, suspended death sentences are rarely carried out. Therefore, it is believed that both the defence ministers, upon the expiration of the two-year reprieve, will have their sentences commuted to life imprisonment without parole.

Wei Fenghe, currently 72, joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1970 at age 16. He has largely served in the PLA Second Artillery and PLA Rocket Force.⁵ His successor and close confidant, Li Shangfu, is currently 68 years old, having spent most of his career serving at the Xichang Satellite Launch Centre before being transferred to the CMC.⁶ Li Shangfu succeeded Wei Fenghe as the 13th Minister of National Defence in March 2023. Only a few months after his appointment, Li Shangfu was investigated for charges of corruption in August 2023, and, in the process, his predecessor, Wei Fenghe, was also investigated. Both were found guilty of corruption, and in June 2024, they were expelled from the Party and the PLA and referred to military procuratorial organs for examination and prosecution.⁷

¹ [“First-Instance Verdicts Announced in Cases of Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu \(魏凤和案、李尚福案一审宣判\)”](#), *Xinhua*, 7 May 2026.

² Zhang Guanghui, [“China's Two Former Defense Ministers—Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu—Sentenced to Death with a Two-Year Reprieve; Face Life Imprisonment \(中国两任前防长魏凤和李尚福被判死缓将终身监禁\)”](#), *Zaobao*, 8 May 2026.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ [“Death Sentence with a Two-year Reprieve \(死刑缓期二年执行\)”](#), *Baidu*, 2026.

⁵ [“Wei Fenghe \(魏凤和\)”](#), *Baidu*, 2026.

⁶ [“Li Shangfu \(李尚福\)”](#), *Baidu*, 2026.

⁷ [“\[News Figures\] From Chinese Defense Ministers to Convicts with Suspended Death Sentences: Why Did Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu Fall from Grace? \(【新闻人物】从中国防长到死缓犯魏凤和与李尚福为何落马?\)”](#), *Sworld*, 8 May 2026.

Corruption had been a deeply rooted structural issue in the Chinese system, including in its military.⁸ In the Chinese system, corruption encompasses both economic corruption (embezzlement, misappropriation of public funds, and bribery) and disciplinary corruption (violations of social norms and dereliction of duty) that harm the public interest.⁹ In China, *guanxi* (social network) is a major channel of corruption, particularly in the military. *Guanxi* is an informal channel based on personal relationships among individuals, which creates obligations that lead to a continual exchange of favours.¹⁰

The *guanxi* network plays an important role in Chinese military corruption in various forms, such as the buying and selling of official posts and rent-seeking. Luo Yuan (罗援), a retired PLA Major General, observed that “it is demoralising for active troops to see some people obtain abnormal promotions because of their links to senior leaders”.¹¹ In the defence procurement process, enterprises embedded within these networks often reap substantial profits through irregular means, such as rigged internal bidding and targeted procurement.

Since 1980, successive regimes in China have launched anti-corruption campaigns characterised by intensified law enforcement. However, these campaigns failed to effectively check corruption. With Xi Jinping in power since 2012, the anti-corruption campaign has been unprecedentedly far-reaching and has charged government officials at all levels.¹² Now, it operates through regular inspections of sub-national governments, central ministries and bureaus, state-owned enterprises, and all military branches.¹³

Though corruption under Xi Jinping has declined significantly compared to the past, the regime has often used ‘corruption’ as a tool to frame and purge rivals within its system. For instance, in the first round of the anti-corruption drive initiated in 2012, while a significant number of corrupt military officers were prosecuted, most of the senior-level officers prosecuted were Xi Jinping’s rivals,

⁸ Brian J. Sirois, “[Corruption in the PLA: Retarding China’s Rise as a Great Power](#)”, United States Army War College, March 2013.

⁹ Kilkon Ko and Cuifen Weng, “[Critical Review of Conceptual Definitions of Chinese Corruption: A Formal-Legal Perspective](#)”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 20, No. 70, 9 May 2011, pp. 359–378.

¹⁰ Xiangru YIN, “[An Analysis of Corruption in China: The Guanxi Network of Chinese High Level Officials and Governors](#)”, Clark University, May 2017.

¹¹ Xiaoting Li, “[Cronyism and Military Corruption in the Post Deng Xiaoping Era: Rethinking the Party Commands-the-Gun Model](#)”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 26, No. 107, 2017, p. 696.

¹² Zheng Chang, “[Understanding the Corruption Networks Revealed in the Current Chinese Anti-corruption Campaign: A Social Network Approach](#)”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 113, 2018, p. 736.

¹³ Erik H. Wang, “[The effect of Anti-corruption Efforts on Evaluations of Governance](#)”, *Journal of Contemporary Governance*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2025, p. 447.

such as Xu Caihou, Guo Boxiong and Fang Fenghui.¹⁴ In the first round of the anti-corruption drive, it seems that Xi Jinping was in control because none of his confidants was prosecuted.

However, the second round of the anti-corruption drive initiated in 2023 resulted in the prosecution of two of Xi Jinping's closest confidants, indicating that the drive was not fully under the leader's control. The first round of the anti-corruption drive in 2012 primarily aimed to purge Guo Boxiong, the former vice-chairman of the CMC, and his faction, and to take full control of the PLA. The second round of the anti-corruption drive in 2023 aimed to remove Zhang Youxia and his faction, who were accused of “forming cliques” and abusing their power in military decision-making.¹⁵

In the case of Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu, some analysts are of the view that it is not merely a case of corruption but rather the result of an internal power struggle within the Communist Party of China (CPC).¹⁶ They suggest that the downfall, investigation and prosecution of Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu is the result of infighting within the military's top echelon. Analyst Wang Youqun suggests that with Xi Jinping's backing, General He Weidong, then Vice-Chairman of the CMC and General Miao Hua, then director of the CMC Political Department, manoeuvred to oust Li Shangfu and, in the process, Wei Fenghe as well.¹⁷ Their ultimate objective was to topple Zhang Youxia, thereby allowing He Weidong to assume the role of First-ranking Vice Chairman of the CMC and Miao Hua to become the second-ranking Vice Chairman of the CMC, creating a power-sharing triumvirate in military leadership.¹⁸

Subsequently, Zhang Youxia, having been backed into a corner, launched a counter-attack, resulting in the removal of He Weidong and Miao Hua. As the fight within the top leadership intensified, Xi Jinping targeted Zhang Youxia and his confidant Liu Zhenli, a CMC member and Chief of Staff of the CMC Joint Staff Department, and both were sent for investigation in January 2026. Three months later, in May 2026, the death sentences handed down to Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu,

¹⁴ Abhishek K. Darbey, “[Xi Jinping's Crackdown on Corruption in the PLA](#)”, Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 15 July 2025.

¹⁵ De Zheng (德正), “[Why Won't Xi Jinping Let Zhang Youxia Go? \(习近平为何不放过张又侠?\)](#)”, *DW*, 29 January 2026.

¹⁶ Chris Buckley, “[China Hands Suspended Death Sentences to 2 Former Defense Ministers](#)”, *The New York Times*, 7 May 2026.

¹⁷ “[Wang Youqun: Five Major Truths Behind the Suspended Death Sentences of Two CCP Defense Ministers](#) (王友群：中共两任防长被判死缓的五大真相)”, *The Epoch Times*, 13 May 2026.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

instilling fear among serving senior officers, are seen as an act by Xi Jinping to establish his authority within the military.¹⁹

Amid ongoing factional rivalry since 2023, an unusual situation has arisen in the military's top leadership, with five of the seven positions on the CMC remaining vacant. Moreover, the Party has made no attempts to fill these positions. It is inferred that, with Zhang Youxia and his associate Liu Zhenli in positions at the CMC, Xi Jinping was cautious about appointing his men to these vacant posts because two of his confidants, He Weidong and Miao Hua, had already been framed and purged by Zhang Youxia.

Xi appointed Dong Jun as the new defence minister but kept him away from the CMC, perhaps to protect him from Zhang Youxia's influence and attack. Now, with Zhang Youxia and his faction's removal from the CMC, it can be presumed that in the near future, Xi Jinping will appoint his men to fill the five vacated posts of the CMC. Therefore, the declaration of death sentences announced in early May was the final warning for all serving military officers to remain 'loyal' to Xi Jinping.

Conclusion

With the removal and prosecution of Zhang Youxia and his faction from the CMC and the Chinese military, Xi Jinping is in full authority over the CMC and the PLA. It is likely that in the near future, all remaining positions at the CMC will be filled by Xi Jinping's men. Xi Jinping has used the anti-corruption drives since 2012 to frame and purge his rivals. The death sentences for former defence ministers Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu will serve as a strong deterrent to all serving military officers against disloyalty to Xi Jinping.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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