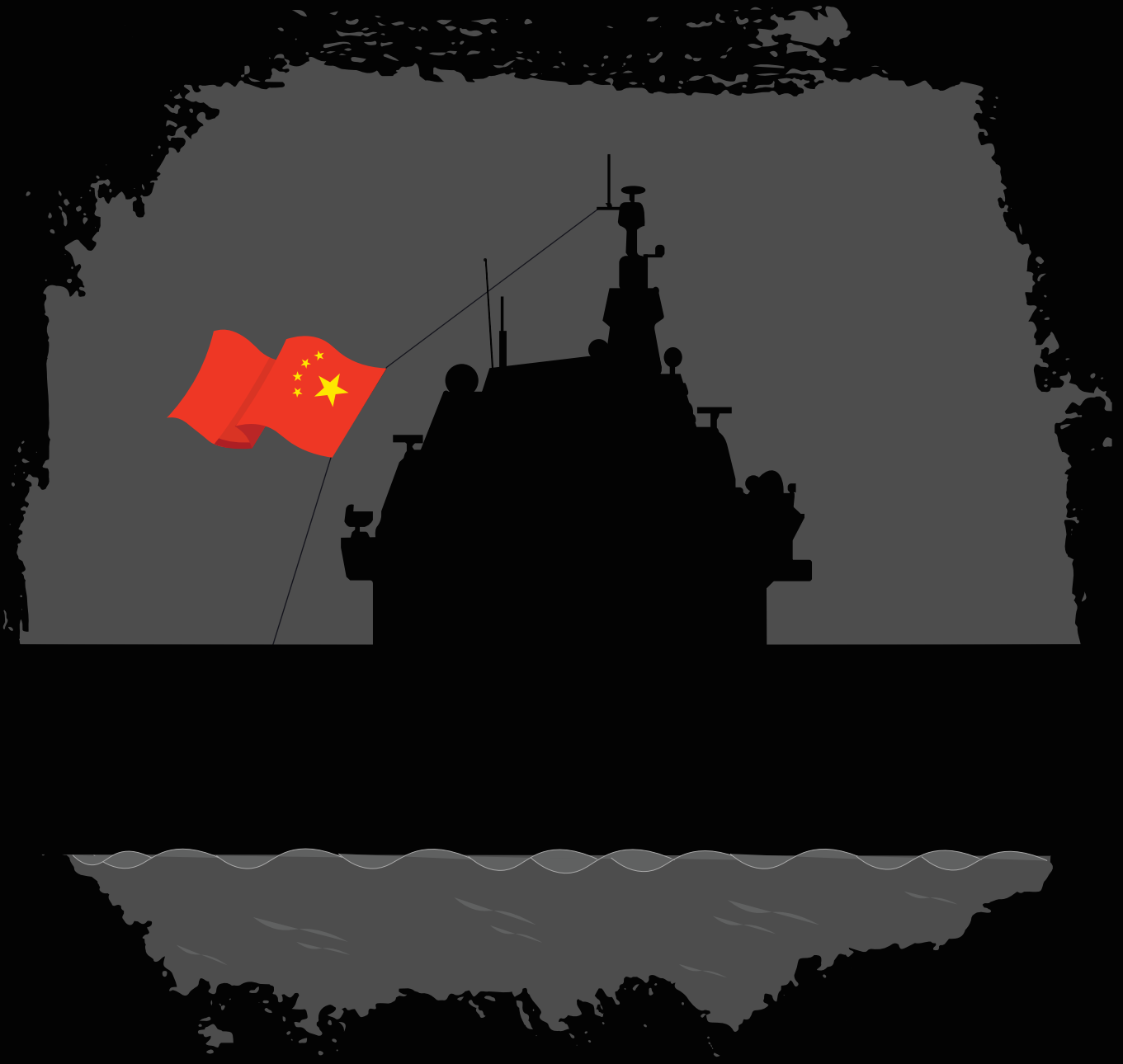




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Admiral Miao Hua's Fall:
Further Navy Fallout?



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Admiral Miao Hua's Fall: Further Navy Fallout?

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Major news today! Pending investigation, Xi Jinping's protégé Admiral Miao Hua (苗华) has been suspended from his duties as a member of China's Central Military Commission (CMC) and Director of the CMC Political Work Department. This decision was made by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Central Committee, Defense Spokesperson Senior Colonel Wu Qian announced at the scheduled monthly People's Liberation Army (PLA) press briefing on 28 November 2024, because Miao is "suspected of serious violation of discipline."² By the time such CCP investigations become public, conviction is a foregone conclusion. Miao's fall thus raises three principal questions: Why is he being removed, will his cronies suffer similarly, and what does it mean for China's navy and military?

CMSI's Perspectives and Key Takeaways:

- Admiral Miao Hua has been suspended from duties as a member of China's Central Military Commission and Director of the CMC Political Work Department. Miao's position, which oversees all senior PLA promotions, may have significant ramifications for his patronage network—including "current" Defense Minister Admiral Dong Jun³ and possibly Secretary of the CMC's Politics and Law Commission Admiral Wang Renhua,⁴ among others.
- This is the first time the CMC has two positions (one-third of six total) vacant simultaneously. The only other time China's highest military body experienced such upheaval in recent years involved the purging of Vice Chairmen General Xu Caihou (CCP CMC 19 September 2004–15 November 2012, PRC CMC 13 March 2005–14 March 2013; expelled June 2014, died facing court martial 15 March 2015) and General Guo Boxiong (CCP CMC 15 November 2002–15 November 2012, PRC CMC 16 March 2003–14 March 2013; expelled 30 July 2015, sentenced to life imprisonment 25 July 2016).
- Admiral Miao is the seventh CMC member to be purged since Xi assumed power in 2012. The humiliation of his public removal is especially embarrassing because Xi transferred him to the PLAN in 2014, promoted him to full (three-star) admiral in 2015, and elevated him to the CMC in 2017. His suspension suggests Xi, or others, may have wanted to make his removal an example for the PLA.
- Admiral Dong Jun, China's Minister of National Defense, may be caught up in this purge. Dong has close ties to Miao and was absent from Singaporean Vice Admiral Aaron Beng's introductory PRC visit (24–27 November 2024). At a minimum, Admiral Dong normally would have hosted an office call for VADM Beng during his visit.
- Admiral Miao's removal suggests Xi remains bore-sighted on achieving China's 2027 Centennial Military Building Goal⁵ and seeks to ensure his armed forces reach maximum preparation for Taiwan contingencies on his watch, even at the cost of short-term setbacks and bureaucratic churn.

- In August 2024, the two top Generals commanding the PLA Rocket Force were removed, together with other leading PLARF officers. Admiral Miao's suspension and the possible implication of Admiral Dong Jun could suggest Xi has shifted his purging focus to the PLA Navy (PLAN).

Background:

The seventh CMC member (current and retired) to be purged since Xi assumed power in 2012, Miao fell from the PLA's commanding heights as one of four ordinary members (with one vacancy created by former Defense Minister Li Shangfu's removal and subsequently unfilled) under Commander-in-Chief Xi and Vice Chairmen Zhang Youxia and He Weidong.⁶ Over the past year and a half, more than a dozen senior PLA officials and defense industry executives have fallen.⁷

Clearly, this is not about corruption *per se*. Graft, including promotion-related pay-to-play, kickbacks, and monetizing of (mis)managed resources, has long been a PRC system *feature*, not a *bug*. Because corruption is rampant within the PLA, investigating it primarily involves political decisions. Because the Party is inherently above the law, corruption cannot be eradicated without eviscerating the system. Determined to preserve the system and secure his legacy at all costs, Xi instead strives to impose loyalty, control, and ability to execute top-priority military operations—above all, against Taiwan. His core message: nobody is exempt from these unforgiving imperatives. Less clear is who was involved in Miao's defenestration, and what blowback in credibility Xi may face for his selection of atypical acolytes ultimately deemed unreliable.

Born in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, Miao was a PLA Ground Force officer for most of his career, primarily in units in Taiwan-facing Fujian, overlapping with Xi's rise in local and regional administration there. Miao served mainly in the 31st Group Army (Military Unit Cover Designator 73111), based in Xiamen within the former Nanjing Military Region—now part of the Eastern Theater Command.⁸ After enlisting in December 1969, Miao served in the 31st Group Army's 92nd Division's 274th Regiment. Also in the Nanjing Military Region, Miao served as the Political Commissar of the 12th Group Army.⁹ In the 1990s, Miao returned to the 31st Group Army, becoming Director of the 93rd Division's Political Department, and later Political Commissar of the 91st Division. In August 1999, Miao was appointed Director of 31st Group Army's Political Department where he served until July 2005, attaining the rank of Major General in July 2001. Being a protégé of Xi subsequently gave Miao an unusual opportunity: transferring services in December 2014 to become the PLAN's Political Commissar and receiving his third star on 31 July 2015. In October 2017, Miao reached the pinnacle position of his career—CMC Political Work Department Director—while continuing to wear a navy uniform. This is part of a pattern in which Xi has reassigned and promoted officers unconventionally, apparently to bypass established networks and impose his control.¹⁰

Implications:

Now speculation swirls as to which of Miao's associates may likewise succumb to bureaucratic machinations. While Miao was PLAN Political Commissar (December 2014–September 2017), Admiral Dong Jun was one of the PLAN Deputy Chiefs of Staff (December 2014–December 2017)—a substantial overlap. Dong subsequently parlayed experience as a Deputy Commander of the East Sea Fleet and Commander of its newly-established East China Sea Joint Operations Command Center, a Southern Theater Command Deputy Commander (2017–21), and the PLAN's Commander (2021–24), *inter alia*, into his present position as PRC Defense Minister. Notably, unlike his predecessor, the now-

deposed General Li Shangfu, Dong has neither become a CMC Member nor a State Councilor—despite a longtime vacancy.¹¹ Spokesperson Wu rejected a *Financial Times* article¹² (re-reported by the *South China Morning Post*)¹³ claiming Dong was under investigation for corruption and repeated tautologically that Dong remains Defense Minister.¹⁴ China’s Foreign Ministry also denied the story.¹⁵ These dismissals are insufficient to clarify matters, or where things may be heading.

Cai Shenkun, formerly a hard-hitting reporter for Guangdong’s leading journal *Southern Weekly* with a strong track record of predicting official PRC developments before they become public, maintains that Miao lost Xi’s trust in part through excessive cultivation of a personal network.¹⁶ The potential for such factionalism or “mountaintopism” (山头主义) in the form of Party, State, and Military officials developing their own alternative power centers has long concerned CCP leaders.¹⁷ Cai asserts that since Admiral Dong Jun was promoted by Miao, and Admiral Wang Renhua is a protégé of Miao’s, they are now both vulnerable.¹⁸ Cai further asserts that Xi’s distrust of Miao led him to promote the latter’s deputy He Hongjun (何宏军) to facilitate Miao’s replacement. In April 2019, He became Deputy Director of the CMC’s Political Work Department. Xi promoted He to Lieutenant General (two-star) in December 2019 and full General (three-star) in July 2024.¹⁹ Cai ascribes Dong’s failure to enter the CMC despite a readily-available position to Xi’s distrust of Miao and his recommendation of Dong.²⁰

Most recently, Cai asserts that “Dong Jun has been dismissed (董军落马).”²¹ The present authors are unable to verify this claim. However, it seems significant that Singapore Chief of Defence Force VADM Aaron Beng’s introductory PRC visit (24–27 November 2024) did not reportedly include a meeting with Dong. Instead, VADM Beng called on CMC Joint Staff Department Chief General Liu Zhenli.²²

Conclusions:

In August 2024, PLARF leadership was almost entirely removed—a shocking decapitation of the force that controls the bulk of China’s most advanced missiles and nuclear weapons. Admiral Miao’s suspension may suggest that Xi has shifted his focus to purging the Navy. In addition to the reported vulnerability of Admirals Dong Jun and Wang Renhua, former PLAN Commander Yao Cheng—a graduate of China’s former Naval Aeronautical and Astronautical College and Naval Flight College,²³ as well as its Naval Command College—states that current PLAN Political Commissar Admiral Yuan Huazhi (袁华智) and his predecessor Admiral Qin Shengxiang (秦生祥) and are rumored to be under investigation.²⁴ If Admirals Yuan and Qin are indeed expelled from the PLAN, that would confirm the extent of scrutiny targeting China’s navy. Another source posits that first-ranked CMC Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia is making an example of the PLAN, possibly as a means of wielding his tremendous power.²⁵

Regardless of initial targets and maneuvering, Miao’s investigation is sure to reverberate across PLAN networks. “The history with these investigations in the PLA are that once the string of corruption is pulled many other threads are revealed and the sweater unravels,” observes Georgetown professor and former intelligence analyst Dennis Wilder.²⁶ It may be a case of “taking out tigers,” “swatting flies,” and “hunting down foxes”—members of a targeted military leader’s patronage network will go down either before or after him, oftentimes within the same service. “My gut tells me that this whole thing revolves around Miao taking bribes to get people promoted in grade (not rank) to flag officer billets,” former Assistant Air Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and longtime PLA analyst Ken Allen told the present authors. “As such, each of them will also most likely be suspended.”

The investigations confirmed and rumored to date would stress any nation's armed forces and component(s). At the same time, China's navy and military enjoy globally unrivaled resources and support by many measures. What is clear is that Xi is prioritizing military control and effectiveness for major missions over stopgap internal security efforts or symbolic prestige. Prioritizing either of those latter objectives would be far simpler, easier, cheaper, and more direct than the difficult, sophisticated work that he is visibly pursuing—possibly amid political infighting as well. Perhaps an analogue may be found in Xi's recent disestablishment of the Strategic Support Force, itself a product of his sweeping post-2015 military reforms, and rapid reassignment of its vitally important activities.

These are the actions of a power-obsessed but rational and formidable authoritarian leader deadly serious about preparing for, and possibly waging, major war. The CCP system suffers endemic weaknesses, including ruthless elite power struggles and the chronic official purging resurfacing now, which questions the loyalty of the PLA and undermines capabilities and readiness.²⁷ The CCP system also boasts tremendous strengths—including totalitarian means to mobilize and concentrate resources and personnel dramatically. This cuts both ways, deeply.

As the ultimate product and head of this contradictory system, Xi appears dissatisfied with his military and its leaders and distrustful of the sharpness and durability of the sword in his hand—but determined to hone his Party Army to meet his objectives through purges, reorganizations, and new campaigns to strive harder. He is allowing the PLA to struggle now while pursuing the goal of making Taiwan and its supporters struggle and surrender later. He remains large and in charge, but as a man in a hurry who is running short on time on a steepening treadmill, threatened by political enemies eager to push him off if he falters.

Churn and challenges are certain, crisis and conflict may follow. America and its allies, partners, and friends must maximize their own military strengths and prepare accordingly.

The views the authors express here are theirs alone and do not necessarily represent the views, policies, or positions of the U.S. Department of Defense or its components, to include the Department of the Navy or the U.S. Naval War College.

¹ Dr. Erickson is Professor of Strategy at CMSI. CAPT Sharman, USN (Ret.) is Director of CMSI. They are solely responsible for the views expressed here, which are based solely on open sources, as well as any errors herein; they made every effort to double-check data during the less than twenty-four hours between the official announcement of Admiral Miao's suspension and this note's publication. Unless otherwise specified, date ranges represent an officer's time in service for their career capstone position, from which they typically retired or were purged directly. The authors thank Ken Allen and numerous anonymous reviewers for invaluable inputs.

² Li Weichao, "Admiral Miao Hua Suspended from Duty, Pending Investigation: Defense Spokesperson," *China Military Online*, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16354908.html.

³ Andrew S. Erickson and Christopher H. Sharman, "Admiral Dong Jun Engages Friends and Foes: China's First Naval Defense Minister Brings Joint Operational Experience," *CMSI Note 2* (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 30 December 2023), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/2/>.

⁴ Andrew S. Erickson, "Admiral Wang Renhua: Exemplifying Jointness and Oversight for China's Navy amid Xi's Grade-and-Rank Reforms," *CMSI Note 5* (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 11 April 2024), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/5/>.

⁵ Andrew S. Erickson, "PRC Pursuit of 2027 'Centennial Military Building Goal' (建军一百年奋斗目标): Sources & Analysis," *China Analysis from Original Sources*, 19 December 2021, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/12/prc-pursuit-of-2027-centennial-military-building-goal-sources-analysis/>.

⁶ Chun Han Wong, "China Targets Senior Admiral in New Round of Defense Purges," *Wall Street Journal*, 28 November 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-targets-senior-admiral-in-new-round-of-defense-purges-9f6d3c9e>.

⁷ Lyle Morris/@LyleJMorris, “The Other Shoe Has Dropped,” 28 November 2024, <https://x.com/LyleJMorris/status/1862165925358608867>. Deposed PLA officials include Defense Minister Li Shangfu (12 March–24 October 2023) and his retired predecessor General Wei Fenghe (2018–23); former PLA Air Force Commander General Ding Laihang (2017–21, dismissed as 14th National People’s Congress representative 4 December 2023); and PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) Commander General Li Yuchao (January 2022–July 2023, dismissed July 2023), Deputy Commander Lieutenant General Liu Guangbin (~2022–23, removed June 2023) and his predecessors Lieutenant Generals Zhang Zhenzhong (2016–22, removed as CMC Joint Staff Department Deputy Chief of Staff June 2023) and Li Chuanguang (~2018–23, removed December 2023), Political Commissar Lieutenant General Xu Zhongbo (2020–23, removed June 2023), Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Sun Jinming (2022–24, expelled July 2024), and Armaments Department Head Lu Hong (removed December 2023). Deposed defense industry executives include former China State Shipbuilding Corporation Chairman Hu Wenming (2012–19), who oversaw China’s aircraft carrier development program—sentenced to 13 years’ imprisonment for corruption; and his General Manager, Sun Bo, sentenced to 12 years.

⁸ The 31st Group Army operated from 1949–2017. 【#中央军委委员苗华被停职检查#】 [Miao Hua, A Member of the Central Military Commission, Was Suspended for Inspection], 大公文匯網 [Ta Kung Hui], 28 November 2024, https://m.weibo.cn/p/231440_-5105787105970507?title=编辑记录.

⁹⁹ Joel McFadden, Kim Fassler, and Justin Godby, “The New PLA Leadership: Xi Molds China’s Military to His Vision,” in Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), 570, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/Chairman-Xi/Chairman-Xi_Chapter-14.pdf?ver=2019-02-08-112005-803.

¹⁰ “Is it True That China is Having its 3rd Chinese Defense Minister in a Row under Investigation?” Wen-Ti Sung, @wentisung, 27 November 2024, <https://x.com/wentisung/status/1861644840129437909>.

¹¹ “CPC Central Military Commission” and “PRC Central Military Commission,” PRC Ministry of National Defense, PRC Ministry of National Defense, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/Leadership/index.html>.

¹² Demetri Sevastopulo, “China’s Defence Minister Placed under Investigation for Corruption,” *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/641446ed-71b1-42f6-a9d8-3bc4d7b7da23>.

¹³ Hayley Wong and Yuanyue Dang, “Senior PLA Ideology Official Miao Hua Under Investigation for ‘Serious Discipline Violations’,” *South China Morning Post*, 28 November 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3288499/high-ranking-chinese-military-official-under-probe-serious-rule-violations>.

¹⁴ Christian Shepard and Katrina Northrop, “China Announces Top Military Official is Under Investigation,” *Washington Post*, 28 November 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/11/28/china-military-corruption-investigation-miao-hua/>; Dake Kang/@dakekang, “REPORTER: Who is China’s Defense Minister Now?” 28 November 2024, <https://x.com/dakekang/status/1862067779551002935>.

¹⁵ “China Defence Minister Dong Jun’s Fate Unclear as Differing Accounts Emerge on Corruption Probe,” *Straits Times*, 28 November 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/chinese-defence-minister-dong-juns-fate-unclear-as-differing-accounts-emerge-on-corruption>.

¹⁶ Miao “promoted and recommended a group of his own people to Xi Jinping, which is something Xi Jinping cannot accept...” 蔡慎坤 [Cai Shenkun]/@cskun1989, “中央军委政治工作部主任, 海军上将苗华前天被中央军委军纪委直接带走...” [The Director of the CMC’s Political Work Department, Admiral Miao Hua, Was Taken Away Directly by the CMC’s Military Discipline Committee the Day before Yesterday....], 11 November 2024, <https://x.com/cskun1989/status/1855859390177497127>.

¹⁷ “山头主义” [Mountaintopism], <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/山头主义>.

¹⁸ “Anyone who wants to be promoted needs Miao Hua’s approval and recommendation. Miao Hua himself came from the navy, so he promoted a large number of naval flag officers he was familiar with during his tenure, such as the current Minister of Defense Dong Jun, who is a navy admiral.” Similarly, “In addition to placing his people in various military branches as commanders, Miao Hua also intervened in some disciplinary inspection work under the CMC. Miao Hua appointed... Wang Renhua, who was also promoted to admiral and then served as the secretary of the CMC’s Political and Legal Affairs Commission. Wang Renhua also came from the navy and was Miao Hua’s man.” Cai Shenkun, “The Director of the CMC’s Political Work Department...”

¹⁹ 梅常伟 [Mei Changwei], “中央军委举行晋升上将军衔仪式 习近平颁发命令状并向晋衔的军官表示祝贺” [The Central Military Commission Holds a Ceremony to Promote to the Rank of Flag and General Officers. Xi Jinping Issues an Order and Congratulates the Promoted Officers], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 10 July 2024, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/20240709/b5ad5f32ad3146078e9453b826b71b29/c.html>.

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- ²⁰ 蔡慎坤/@cskun1989, “中央军委政治工作部主任, 海军上将苗华前天被中央军委军纪委直接带走...” [The Director of the CMC’s Political Work Department, Admiral Miao Hua, Was Taken Away Directly by the CMC’s Military Discipline Committee the Day before Yesterday....], 11 November 2024, <https://x.com/cskun1989/status/1855859390177497127>.
- ²¹ 蔡慎坤/@cskun1989, “尽管外交部用“捕风捉影”来回应董军出事的传闻, 但外交部没有办法让董军出来溜溜” [Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Responded to the Rumors of Dong Jun’s Accident by “Chasing rumors,” There Was No Way for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Let Dong Jun Escape], 28 November 2024, <https://x.com/cskun1989/status/1862022676120027420>.
- ²² “Chief of Defence Force, Vice Admiral (VADM) Aaron Beng, made his introductory visit to the People’s Republic of China from 24 to 27 Nov.,” Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 28 November 2024, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=985971203568198&id=100064659825216. As Defence Force Chief, Beng ranks below Singapore’s Defence Minister. However, China’s Defense Minister handles all foreign exchanges.
- ²³ 姚诚 [Yao Cheng]/@Yaochen64034657, <https://x.com/Yaochen64034657>. In 2017 these institutions were merged to become Naval Aviation University. “Section 3-19: Naval Aviation University,” in Kenneth Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People’s Liberation Army’s 37 Academic Institutions* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 11 June 2020), 130, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Other-Topics/2020-06-11%20PLA%20Academic_Institutions.pdf.
- ²⁴ 伍宇亮 [Wu Yuliang], “张又侠拿海军开刀 习军权被削弱迹象” [Zhang Youxia Takes on the Navy. Signs of Xi’s Military Power Being Weakened.], 人民报 [“People’s Daily”—not the official CCP paper], 11 October 2024, <https://renminbao.com/rmb/articles/2024/10/11/85702.html>.
- ²⁵ 燕銘時評 [Yan Ming Commentary]/@yanmingshiping, “习近平军中亲信上将苗华传被带走调查” [Admiral Miao Hua, A Close Military Confidant of Xi Jinping’s, is Reportedly Taken Away for Investigation], 28 November 2024, <https://x.com/yanmingshiping/status/1862063226353061893>.
- ²⁶ Trevor Hunnicutt, Idrees Ali, and Laurie Chen, “China Defence Minister Dong Jun’s Fate Unclear as Corruption Probe Sparks Differing Account,” *Reuters*, 28 November 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-defence-minister-placed-under-investigation-corruption-ft-reports-2024-11-27/>.
- ²⁷ A priority for research and public sharing of findings should be the extent to which corruption and ensuing investigations might slow down or sidetrack the PLA’s pursuit of Xi’s 2027 Goal. Investigations concerning research, development, and acquisition, as well as major construction projects, could slow PLA development. Any inability of the purges and investigations during Xi’s time in power might undermine his confidence in PLA political reliability or operational capability.