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# Dirty But Preparing to Fight

VADM Li Pengcheng's Downfall Amid Increasing PLAN Readiness

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## Main Findings

- Although corruption runs deep in the PLA Navy (PLAN) and across China's armed forces, disciplinary-related removals appear not to have a major impact on naval capabilities or operations.
- The fight against corruption within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has General Secretary Xi Jinping's attention and appears to be picking up steam for 2025. The Standing Committee of the 14<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress (NPC) issued a report on 25 December 2024 identifying Vice Admiral Li Pengcheng (李鹏程) as one of eight NPC deputies removed for "serious violations of discipline and the law."
- Li was an officer on the fast track and identified early in his career by PLA press as one to watch. He had the unprecedented distinction of having command of two separate Gulf of Aden anti-piracy escort task force deployments, extensive international maritime experience, and involvement in some of the PLAN's most significant international navy accomplishments. Li's career and his operations in the Mediterranean Sea had the personal attention of Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman Xi.
- Vice Admiral Li Pengcheng replaced Vice Admiral Ju Xinchun (鞠新春) as the Commander of the Southern Theater Command (STC) Navy roughly a year ago. Admiral Ju suffered Admiral Li's same fate. Comparing and contrasting two consecutive PLAN STC commanders serving in the same capacity, sacked one year apart, provides a revealing dataset to analyze the impact of sacking the commander, and of corruption more broadly, on PLAN operational capabilities and how they affect the force.
- The PLAN may be playing high-stakes musical chairs with its leadership, but it has a deep enough talent pool to do so without prohibitive problems. When one leader is purged, another is on deck. Politicized corruption investigations and their imposition of costs are fundamentally a speedbump rather than a showstopper.
- Regardless of corruption's pervasive persistence, PLAN operational capabilities continue to improve, and cutting-edge, lethal weapons systems regularly enter service. Corruption may contribute to inefficiencies, but it does not curtail PLAN advances. Related removals are neither an indicator of prohibitive incompetence nor a self-defeating constraint on operational capabilities.

## Introduction

Recent corruption investigations into People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers and their impact on military readiness in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have generated tremendous interest. Hyperbolic headlines trumpeting a slowdown in PLA operational readiness surged following the Pentagon's release of its 2024 *China Military Power Report* at the end of December, which squarely addressed PLA corruption as one of three special topics in that year's edition.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, however, although corruption runs deep in the PLAN and across China's armed forces, the disciplinary-related removals appear not to have a major impact on naval capabilities or operations.

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<sup>1</sup> *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 18 December 2024), 159, <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>. [Hereafter: CMPR 2024.]

Western interest in PLA corruption was piqued following the suspension in November 2024 of Admiral Miao Hua (苗华), the seventh CMC member to be purged since Xi became the PRC's paramount leader in 2012.<sup>2</sup> Then, as if to add fuel to the fire, the Standing Committee of the 14<sup>th</sup> NPC issued a report on 25 December 2024 identifying Vice Admiral Li Pengcheng as one of eight NPC deputies (one of two military members) removed for “serious violations of discipline and the law” (严重违法违纪)—a euphemism for corruption.<sup>3</sup> This is part of a larger pattern: in less than two years, fourteen of China's military lawmakers have been ousted from the NPC.<sup>4</sup>

Anticorruption will be a leading PRC theme for the foreseeable future. China's top disciplinary agency, the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, held a plenary session from 6–8 January to address anticorruption priorities for 2025.<sup>5</sup> In opening the event on 6 January, Xi personally set the tone for heightened anticorruption measures in the year ahead. “Corruption is the biggest threat facing the [Communist] Party,” Xi declared. “We must... further strengthen our determination and confidence in the fight against corruption.”<sup>6</sup>

With each PLA officer's ejection, speculation about the impact on operational readiness swirls. The near back-to-back removals of senior Admirals Miao from the CMC and Li from command of the STC Navy and deputy command of the STC raises three important questions.

- First, how do recent purges of PLAN leaders impact the service's operational readiness?
- Second, how do these leadership changes affect the navy's ability to achieve key milestone objectives, such as its 2027 Centennial Military Building Goal and the PLA's 2035 modernization objectives?<sup>7</sup>
- Third, what has been the broader pattern of PLAN flag officer removals over time, and how has it affected the force? More specifically, do these cases raise questions about the

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew S. Erickson and Christopher H. Sharman, “Admiral Miao Hua's Fall: Further Navy Fallout?” *CMSI Note 11* (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 28 November 2024), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/11/>.

<sup>3</sup> “第十四届全国人民代表大会常务委会员代表资格审查委员会关于个别代表的代表资格的报告” [“Report of the Committee for Examination of Qualifications of Deputies of the Standing Committee of the Fourteenth National People's Congress on the Qualifications of Individual Deputies”], (2024年12月25日第十四届全国人民代表大会常务委会员第十三次会议通过) [Adopted at the Thirteenth Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Fourteenth National People's Congress on 25 December 2024], 中国人大网 [China National People's Congress Web], 25 December 2024, [http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c2/c30834/202412/t20241225\\_442026.html](http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c2/c30834/202412/t20241225_442026.html). [Hereafter: NPC Qualification Report.] According to the report, Li was suspended by the PLAN on 25 November and the Standing Committee of the 14<sup>th</sup> Party Congress terminated Li as member announced his termination on 25 December 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Vanessa Cai, “In Less Than 2 years, 14 of China's Military Lawmakers Have Been Ousted,” *South China Morning Post*, 5 January 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3293349/less-2-years-14-chinas-military-lawmakers-have-been-ousted>.

<sup>5</sup> Article (possibly from China domestic editorial desk) under pseudonym Huaxia, “China's Unyielding Fight against Corruption,” 5 January 2025, <https://english.news.cn/20250105/e29362a9651742d9915660c21af82383/c.html>. For background on such pennames, see David Gitter and Leah Fang, “The Chinese Communist Party's Use of Homophonous Pen Names: An Open-Source Open Secret,” *Asia Policy* 13.1 (January 2018), pp. 69–112.

<sup>6</sup> Dewey Sim, “Top Chinese General Pledges Strict Crackdown on Military Corruption for 2025,” *South China Morning Post*, 10 January 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3294320/top-chinese-general-pledges-strict-crackdown-military-corruption-2025>.

<sup>7</sup> See 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* 以第一手资料研究中国, 19 December 2021; updated 18 April 2023, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/12/prc-pursuit-of-2027-centennial-military-building-goal-sources-analysis/>; CMPR 2024, pp. 30–37.

competence of senior PLAN leaders and therefore the capabilities of the PLAN as a service? If corruption is as endemic as these cases suggest, does that reflect negatively on the PLAN as a functioning organization?

All three questions warrant careful consideration, but the first two are difficult to answer precisely in real time using publicly available sources. Official PRC reporting about PLA activity offers little about military operations in general, with operational specifics even scarcer. At best, curated open-source PRC articles provide brief, limited glimpses into PLAN operations that China wants to spotlight. And, like other militaries, China's armed forces do not openly publish details regarding their military readiness. Absent authoritative information, Western observers often make sweeping generalizations following PLA leadership removals that dismiss China's military operational capabilities. Some go so far as to conclude that because corruption is so bad, the PLA cannot be very good. Insufficient information tends to draw speculative, and possibly dangerous, conclusions.

The rise and fall of Admiral Li's career, however, serves as a useful case study for analyzing the impact of corruption on PLAN operational capabilities and offers a basis for addressing the third set of questions. Holding the concurrent positions of Commander of STC Naval Forces and Deputy STC Commander for the majority of calendar year 2024, Admiral Li had direct oversight and responsibility for manning, training, and equipping, with direct implications for PLAN operational activities in theater. A slowdown or decrease in the complexity of PLAN operations in the South China Sea could suggest an inverse correlation between senior leadership purges and PLAN operational readiness. Conversely, increased complexity or evidence of sustained PLAN operations could indicate that leadership corruption and related purges actually have negligible impact on PLAN operational readiness in practice.

The official announcement of Li's removal, however, occurred just weeks ago. As such, there are insufficient open-source data available in the short time since his downfall to authoritatively identify PLAN operational trends. What makes the examination of Li a particularly instructive exercise, however, is that his predecessor as the Commander of STC Naval Forces, Vice Admiral Ju Xinchun, suffered Li's same fate almost exactly one year ago.<sup>8</sup> Comparing and contrasting two consecutive PLAN STC commanders serving in the same capacity, sacked one year apart, provides a more robust dataset to analyze. Any changes in PLAN STC operational trends in 2024 and beyond might conceivably be related to PLAN senior leadership purges.

### **The PLAN Officer Exemplar**

China's naval fast track personified, Vice Admiral Li Pengcheng rose quickly through its ranks. He served in such key positions as Director of the Navy Headquarters (HQ) Navigation Department, Deputy Chief of Staff of the North Sea Fleet, President of the Naval Equipment Research Academy, Chief of Staff of the then-East Sea Fleet,<sup>9</sup> and Deputy Chief of Staff of the PLAN. While serving at the Naval Equipment Research Academy, he was promoted to Rear Admiral (one-star) on 29

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<sup>8</sup> 青州籍的两位司令员鞠新春、李传广有调动 [“Two Commanders of Qingzhou Origin, Ju Xinchun and Li Chuanguang, Have Been Transferred”], 青州论坛 [Qingzhou Forum], 3 January 2024, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/INIBQB720534M5NN.html>.

<sup>9</sup> 岳怀让、实习生、张巧雨 [Yue Huairang, Shi Shisheng, and Zhang Qiaoyu], 海军东海舰队参谋长换将 李鹏程接棒 刘洪深 [“Chief of Staff of the Navy's East China Sea Fleet Replaced by Li Pengcheng, Who Succeeded Liu Hongshen”], 澎湃新闻新闻 [Pengpai News], 2 June 2016, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1478006](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1478006). Also available at <https://news.sohu.com/20160602/n452477503.shtml>.

December 2014.<sup>10</sup> In March 2024, he was promoted to Vice Admiral and became STC Naval Forces Commander and STC Deputy Commander.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 1: Senior Captain Li Pengcheng<sup>12</sup>

Born in December 1963, Li was a standout from the start of his professional journey. An article published in 2000 by *People's Navy*, the internal service newspaper, singled him out as part of the first group of military science postgraduates trained by the PLAN. Upon Li's completion of his master's studies, the PLAN's Deputy Commander himself awarded Li his master's degree certificate and diploma. The same news report indicates that Li was destined to command the navy's most modern ships.<sup>13</sup> Li established his place in China's naval hall of honor early in his career. A *People's Navy* article from 2010 states that Li served as the Deputy Team Leader (副组长) of the Formation Command Group (编队指挥组) of the PLAN's historic first global circumnavigation (首次环球航行), which transited around the world in 2002.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 海军隆重举行将官军衔晋升仪式, 吴胜利宣读命令 苗华主持仪式 [“The Navy held a Grand Ceremony to Promote Officers to the Rank of Admiral: Wu Shengli Read Out the Order and Miao Hua Presided over the Ceremony”], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], 30 December 2014, p. 1; 吴耀谦, 蒋曦 [Wu Yaoqian and Jiang Xi], 海军总部将领调整到位, 12 名海军大校晋升少将军衔 [“Naval Headquarters Admiral Adjustments in Place, 12 Navy Senior Captains Promoted to the Rank of Rear Admiral”], 澎湃新闻 [Pengpai News], 3 January 2015, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1291014](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1291014).

<sup>11</sup> 陆军原副司令员尤海涛、南部战区原副司令员李鹏程, 严重违纪违法 [“Former Deputy Commander of the Army You Haitao and Former Deputy Commander of the Southern Theater Command Li Pengcheng Committed Serious Disciplinary Violations”], 观察者网 [Observer Net], 26 December 2024, [https://k.sina.cn/article\\_1887344341\\_707e96d502001keiq.html?from=mil&cre=tianyi&mod=wpage&loc=4&r=0&rfunc=56&tj=cxvideo\\_wpage&tr=214](https://k.sina.cn/article_1887344341_707e96d502001keiq.html?from=mil&cre=tianyi&mod=wpage&loc=4&r=0&rfunc=56&tj=cxvideo_wpage&tr=214).

<sup>12</sup> 前陆军副司令员尤海涛南部战区海军司令李鹏程 被罢免 [“Former Army Deputy Commander You Haitao and Southern Theater Navy Commander Li Pengcheng Dismissed”], 星岛头条/元芳有看法 [Sing Tao News/Yuan Fang Has an Opinion], 25 December 2024, <https://info.vanpeople.com/1654256.html>.

<sup>13</sup> 朱立新、陈立军等 [Zhu Lixin, Chen Lijun et al.], 海军和空军航空兵首批 / 团职军事学硕士生毕业 [“The First batch of Military Science Master's Students of the Navy and Air Force Aviation Corps Graduated”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 1 April 2000.

<sup>14</sup> 史兴春、秦若云 [Shi Xingchun and Qin Ruoyun], 兵锋直指未来战场--海军指挥学院紧贴实战培养打赢人才闻思录 [“Soldiers' Blades Pointing Straight to Future Battlefields—The Record of the Naval Command College's Close Adherence to Actual Combat in Training Talents to Win in War”], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], 12 November 2010, p. 3.

Li's ascendancy through the ranks appears to have picked up steam during approximately 2007–11 while he served as Director of the Navy HQ Navigation Assurance Department (海军司令部航海保证部), which is responsible for maritime surveying and mapping—and with it national-level security-, sovereignty-, and historical-nationalism related issues.<sup>15</sup> In this important capacity, Senior Captain Li worked closely with Senior Captain Liu Zhihao, President of China Navigation Press, who apparently succeeded Li in 2011.<sup>16</sup> In one prescient article from 2010—several years before the PRC began building military bases on islands and features it occupies in the South China Sea—Li foreshadowed PRC plans and intentions there. He is quoted in an article in the PLAN's official mouthpiece, stating that “China's territorial sea basepoint islands are at risk of disappearing due to erosion and other reasons.”<sup>17</sup> Through his assertion, Li foreshadowed and justified land reclamation at several of the Spratly Island features Beijing claims, which began three years later.<sup>18</sup>

Another article the same year credits Li for introducing electronic nautical charts to the PLAN. According to this source, it was the first time China had released electronic charts. Once loaded on the Electronic Chart Display and Information System, they would automatically show a given ship's position, thereby mitigating delays inherent in manual plotting on paper charts.<sup>19</sup> The identification of Li in these articles suggests that he was a standout officer on the radar of senior PLAN leadership and likely destined for more senior positions. Yet, circumstances were about to catapult his career to an entirely new level.

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<sup>15</sup> In the latest in many decades of bureaucratic incarnations, and per the “Surveying and Mapping Law of the People's Republic of China” and related State Council and CMC regulations, the PLAN is responsible for managing China's marine surveying and mapping, publishing official PRC nautical charts, and providing official PRC nautical charts to international users. China Navigation Press (中国航海图书出版社), affiliated with the Navy HQ Navigation Assurance Department/China Navy Hydrographic Office (中国人民解放军海军海道测量局), is the sole PRC organization approved by the General Administration of Press and Publication to publish paper and electronic nautical charts. It is chiefly responsible for the publication and distribution of books regarding PRC-claimed sea areas. See 中国人民解放军海军海道测量局 [“China Navy Hydrographic Office”], <http://www.cnho.mil.cn/en/aboutus>; 中国航海图书出版社 [“China Navigation Press”], 26 June 2017, <https://www.cinnet.cn/zh-hans/xsjl/hhkp/kpidjs/2452-zhong-guo-hang-hai-tu-shu-chu-ban-she.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> “我国电子海图覆盖中国全部和世界大部分海区” [China's Electronic Nautical Charts Cover All of China and Most of the World's Sea Areas], 新浪军事 [Sina Military]. 28 October 2011, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2011-10-28/1302671291.html>.

<sup>17</sup> 钱晓虎、翁淮南、李唐 [Qian Xiaohu, Weng Huainan, and Li Tang], “■首次确定无居民海岛的国家所有权 ■首次明确海岛命名将按照国务院有关规定确定和发布 ■首次规定对特殊用途海岛特别保护 ■首次规定任何单位和个人都有保护海岛领海基点义务 《海岛保护法》：呵护祖国的“海上明珠”——解读我国首部《海岛保护法》的颁布对海防建设的重要意义” [■ The First Time to Confirm State Ownership of Uninhabited Islands ■ The First Time to Clarify That the Naming of Islands will be Determined and Announced in Accordance with the Relevant Regulations of the State Council ■ The First Time to Stipulate Special Protection for Islands with Special Uses ■ The First Time to Stipulate That Any Unit and Individual has the Obligation to Protect the Basepoints of the Territorial Sea of Islands; “Island Protection Law”: Protect the “Pearls of the Sea” of the Motherland—Interpretation of the Important Significance of the Promulgation of China's First “Island Protection Law” to Coastal Defense Construction], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 9 January 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Southerland, *China's Island Building in the South China Sea: Damage to the Marine Environment, Implications, and International Law* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission, 12 April 2016), <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-island-building-south-china-sea-damage-marine-environment-implications-and#:~:text=Summary%3A,of%20the%20South%20China%20Sea.>

<sup>19</sup> 我国首次发布国际标准电子海图：海军参谋长杜景臣出席发布会 [“China Releases First International-Standard Electronic Nautical Charts: Chief of Naval Staff Du Jingshen Attends Launch Event”], 人民海军 [People's Navy], p. 1.

## Veteran in Command of Multiple Gulf of Aden Deployments

In 2010, when he served as Director of the PLAN HQ Navigation Assurance Department, in keeping with the PLAN's practice of sending its best and brightest to gain experience leading naval escort task forces,<sup>20</sup> then-Senior Captain Li was assigned to a high-profile command role during China's sixth anti-piracy escort task force deployment to the waters off Somalia. The sixth task force consisted of PLAN vessels *Kunlunshan* (998), *Lanzhou* (170), and *Weishanhu* (887).<sup>21</sup> This three-ship mission was under the Command of South Sea Fleet Chief of Staff Rear Admiral Wei Xueyi.<sup>22</sup> In the final days of the deployment to the Gulf of Aden, *Lanzhou* was dispatched to conduct a five-day port call in Sri Lanka to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Sri Lankan Navy. Rear Admiral Wei rode aboard *Lanzhou* and is photographed<sup>23</sup> serving as the senior PLAN representative to the commemoration.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, Senior Captain Li served as Formation Commander (编队指挥员) of *Kunlunshan* and *Weishanhu* for the two-ship port call to Bahrain.<sup>25</sup> There, Li met with U.S. Navy 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet leaders and hosted them aboard *Kunlunshan*, a Type 071 Landing Platform Dock and

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<sup>20</sup> 岳怀让、马作鹏 [Yue Huairang and Ma Zuopeng], 一周军情 | 二十四名亚丁湾护航编队指挥员, 已有三人晋升中将 ["Military News of the Week: Three of the 24 Commanders of Gulf of Aden Escort Task Forces Have Been Promoted to Vice Admirals"], 澎湃新闻 [Pengpai News], 19 September 2016, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1530520](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1530520). The PLAN has demonstrated pronounced determination to leverage its talent in support of the naval escort task forces (NETFs), take maximum advantage the learning opportunity they represent, and ensure that resulting benefits are distributed across the force. The commanding officers, none of whom have commanded more than one NETF as Task Force Commander, have been drawn from service communities ranging from surface warfare officers to submariners and selected from four different fleet billets: deputy commander (3), chief of staff (3), deputy chief of staff (11), and director of the Equipment Department (1). The Political Commissars (PCs) have been selected from multiple organizations, including fleet, *zhidui*, and support base and base billets: fleet deputy PC (1), director of the Political Department (1), and deputy director of the Political Department (7); fleet Naval Aviation Headquarters Deputy PC (1); submarine base PC (1); destroyer *zhidui* PC (5); landing vessel *zhidui* PC (1); and support base (1). Their ranks have ranged from senior captain to rear admiral, and their grades have ranged from division leader to corps deputy leader and corps leader. As a general rule, PLA commanding officers and PCs are always the same grade; however, that has not been the case for the NETFs. As China's NETFs matured over the years, they created a command staff that mirrored the various PLAN on-shore headquarters, consisting of personnel with the following permanent on-shore headquarters billets: a commanding officer (指挥军官), PC, deputy commanding officer (副指挥军官), and heads of four groups—command group (指挥组), political works group (政工组), logistics group (后勤组), and equipment group (装备组). The authors thank Ken Allen for these insights.

<sup>21</sup> 中国海军舰艇编队圆满结束对巴林的访问 ["Chinese Navy Task Force Successfully Concludes Visit to Bahrain"], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 15 December 2010, p. 7, <https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2010/12-15/2722526.shtml>.

<sup>22</sup> 尹航 [Yin Hang], 中国海军第六批护航编队首次在远海实施沉浮作业 ["China's Sixth Naval Escort Task Force Conducts Sinking and Floating Operations in the Far Seas for the First Time"], 国防部网站 [Ministry of National Defense website], via 中央政府门户网站 [Central Government Portal Website], 5 July 2010, [https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2010-07/05/content\\_1645405.htm](https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2010-07/05/content_1645405.htm).

<sup>23</sup> David M. Liebenberg, "Biographies of Key Chinese Military Officers: PLA General Staff Deputy Chief Lt. General Qi Jianguo, PLA Navy Commander Admiral Wu Shengli, and Key PLA Navy South Sea Fleet Officers" (Arlington, VA: CNA Corporation, April 2013), p. 7, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1014577.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> "Chinese Destroyer Lanzhou Arrives in Sri Lanka," *Xinhua*, 8 December 2010, [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2010-12/08/content\\_21500615\\_2.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2010-12/08/content_21500615_2.htm).

<sup>25</sup> 史兴春、秦若云 [Shi Xingchun and Qin Ruoyun], 兵锋直指未来战场--海军指挥学院紧贴实战培养打赢人才闻思录 ["Soldiers' Blades Pointing Straight to Future Battlefields—The record of the Naval Command College's Close Adherence to Actual Combat in Training Talents to Win in War"], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 12 November 2010, p. 3.

one of the PLAN's largest amphibious vessels at the time.<sup>26</sup> Following the Bahrain port visit, *Kunlunshan* and *Weishanhu* would rendezvous with *Lanzhou* for a port call in Indonesia.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 2: Vice Admiral Fox, Commander U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet meets with Senior Captain Li Pengcheng on 13 December 2010 during *Kunlunshan* port call to Manama, Bahrain.<sup>28</sup>

Li's 2010 performance in the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Gulf apparently impressed his superiors. He was subsequently assigned to serve as Deputy Chief of Staff of the North Sea Fleet.<sup>29</sup> In that capacity, Li served as formation commander in *Mobile-5*, an unprecedented exercise in the western Pacific involving the PLAN's three major fleets from 18 October through 1 November 2013 as part of its annual training plan.<sup>30</sup> He continued his track record of favorable press there, explaining authoritatively to navy reporters, "In modern warfare where discovery means destruction, nobody dares to easily expose himself!"<sup>31</sup> Three years after his first Gulf of Aden deployment, Li was selected to command the 16<sup>th</sup> Escort Task Force—an assignment that drew

<sup>26</sup> 中国海军护航编队与美军第5舰队进行互访 ["The Chinese Navy Escort Formation and the U.S. 5th Fleet Exchanged Visits"], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 13 December 2010,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170225130352/http://war.163.com/10/1213/10/6NPEIT8G00011MTO.html>.

<sup>27</sup> 我海军舰艇编队结束对巴林访问 ["Chinese Naval Task Force Concludes Visit to Bahrain"], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 17 December 2010, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> 组图: 美国海军第5舰队司令参观中国昆仑山舰 ["Photos: Commander of the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet Visits China's Ship *Kunlunshan*"], 国防部网站 [Ministry of National Defense website], 14 December 2010,

<https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/p/2010-12-14/1655623630.html>.

<sup>29</sup> 荣俊杰、王庆厚 [Rong Junjie and Wang Qinghou], 海军第十六批护航编队从青岛启航 ["The 16th Navy Escort Task Force Sets Sail from Qingdao"], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 2 December 2013, [https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2013-12/02/content\\_2540283.htm](https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2013-12/02/content_2540283.htm).

<sup>30</sup> 直击中国海军机动-5号演习: 真正像打仗一样演习 [Watch the Chinese Navy's Maneuver-5 Exercise: A True War-like Exercise], 中国新闻网 [China News Network], 5 November 2013, <https://www.chinanews.com/mil/2013/11-05/5462698.shtml>.

<sup>31</sup> 高毅、李晓、梁庆松、张庆宝、李高健 [Gao Yi, Li Xiao, Liang Qingsong, Zhang Qingbao, and Li Gaojian], 剑指大洋角弓鸣—"机动-5号"远海实兵对抗演习见闻 ["Swords Pointing to the Ocean Corners and Bows Humming—Observations of the 'Mobile-5' Live-Fire Confrontation Exercise in the Far Seas"], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 28 October 2013, p. 1.



widespread accolades and would capture the attention of his Commander-in-Chief, Chairman Xi Jinping himself. The assignment also gave Li the unprecedented distinction of having command, generally speaking, of two escort task forces: critical elements of the sixth, and all of the sixteenth.

On 30 November 2013, the 16<sup>th</sup> PLAN escort task force—consisting of frigates *Yancheng* (546) and *Luoyang* (527), each with an embarked helicopter, as well as supply ship *Taihu* (889)—departed the North Sea Fleet HQ port of Qingdao with over 660 PLAN sailors and special forces personnel.<sup>32</sup> Li Pengcheng was the Task Force Commander.<sup>33</sup> Transiting through the South China Sea, Li led a solemn oath-taking ceremony on the decks of his warships entitled, “Bravely venture into the ocean and shine your sword brightly in the deep blue.” “Normalization cannot be equated with usual. We must meet new challenges and create new achievements, just like the first-ever escort mission,” Li vowed.<sup>34</sup> Unbeknownst to him or his crew at the time, this lofty rhetoric would assume special significance as this deployment was about to draw international attention and firmly establish Li as one of China’s great naval leaders of late.

Li’s escort task force arrived in the Gulf of Aden and relieved the 15<sup>th</sup> escort task force on 22 December.<sup>35</sup> Within days of commencing its ship-protecting duties, Li received new orders from Beijing to split the formation into two groups.<sup>36</sup> *Luoyang* and *Taihu* were to continue their escort duties in the Gulf of Aden, while *Yancheng* was directed to transit through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea to temporarily support United Nations Security Council Resolution 2118 and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) regarding the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons.<sup>37</sup> In the Mediterranean, with Li at the helm, *Yancheng* would operate alongside warships from Russia, Denmark, and Norway to escort Syrian chemical weapons by sea.<sup>38</sup> *Yancheng* assumed escort duties on 31 December 2013 until being relieved by the separately dispatched frigate *Huangshan* (570) on 8 March 2014.<sup>39</sup>

Splitting the formation presented significant operational and tactical challenges for Li in his role as Task Force Commander. How would he handle command and control? How could he accomplish the UN mission and the escort missions simultaneously? Moreover, while he had prior experience in the

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<sup>32</sup> “16<sup>th</sup> Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Sets Sail from Qingdao,” *China Military Online*, 3 December 2013, <http://english.people.com.cn/90786/8472951.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Rong Junjie and Wang Qinghou, “The 16th Navy Escort Task Force Sets Sail from Qingdao.”

<sup>34</sup> 荣俊杰、李晓 [Rong Junjie and Li Xiao], 不寻常的航程 [“An Unusual Voyage”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 1 April 2014, p. 5, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2014-04-01/0830771681.html>.

<sup>35</sup> 李晓、胡全福 [Li Xiao and Hu Quanfu], 我海军两批护航编队在亚丁湾分航 [“Two Chinese Naval Escort Task Forces Sail Separately in the Gulf of Aden”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 23 December 2013, p. 3, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2013-12-23/0630756233.html>; [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_26575810](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_26575810).

<sup>36</sup> Rong and Li, “An Unusual Voyage,” p. 5, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2014-04-01/0830771681.html>.

<sup>37</sup> 孟娜、徐剑梅 [Meng Na, and Xu Jianmei], 习近平和普京共同与参加叙利亚化学武器海运联合护航的中俄军舰舰长视频通话 [“Xi Jinping and Putin Share a Video Call with the Captains of Chinese and Russian Warships Participating in the Joint Escort of Maritime Shipment of Syrian Chemical Weapons”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 7 February 2014, p. 1, [https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2014-02/07/content\\_2580812.htm](https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2014-02/07/content_2580812.htm).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Zhou Wa, “Warships to Help Dispose of Syrian Chemical Weapons,” *China Daily*, 26 December 2013, [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2013-12/26/content\\_17198885.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2013-12/26/content_17198885.htm); Guo Renjie, editor, “Chinese Navy Wraps Up Escort Mission for Syria’s Chemical Weapons,” *China Military Online*, 25 June 2014, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-06/25/content\\_6010867.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-06/25/content_6010867.htm); Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea... and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China’s Maritime Commons Presence* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation/Brookings Institution Press, 2015), p. 197.

Gulf of Aden, he was unfamiliar with multinational operations in general—to say nothing of a novel multilateral mission in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>40</sup>

While these fresh complications could well have appeared daunting, Li capitalized on the knowledge of those with relevant experience. On 4 January 2014, Li pulled *Yancheng* into Cyprus for multilateral consultations with naval leaders from Russia, Denmark, and Norway. This was the first time a PLAN warship had visited Cyprus.<sup>41</sup> Three days later, *Yancheng* executed its first Syrian chemical weapons escort by sea.<sup>42</sup> Later that month, Li embarked on the Russian cruiser *Peter the Great* for one of several rounds of Sino-Russian joint training consultations. There he discussed safety, joint exercises, and aircraft operations with his Russian counterpart.<sup>43</sup> Li's experience with other international navies as well as bilateral and multilateral dialogues appears to have helped him to address several of the trials he would face in the Mediterranean as well as to prepare him for positions of even higher responsibility in the future.

Li's command of the escort task force had CMC Chairman Xi Jinping's personal attention. On 6 February, Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, together in Sochi, Russia for the Olympic games, held a video conference with both Li and his Russian navy counterpart. Xi highlighted the joint maritime cooperation with Russia and extended Lunar New Year's greetings to Li and the crew of *Yancheng*.<sup>44</sup> Li was already an officer destined for positions of greater responsibility, but his interaction with Xi likely provided the momentum necessary to propel his career firmly into the flag ranks. Li's Mediterranean mission ended on 8 March following the completion of seven Syrian chemical weapons escort operations. His ship was relieved by *Huangshan*, which assumed duties as part of the "Chemical Weapons Maritime Escort Task Force."<sup>45</sup> Having been lauded extensively in China's state media, *Yancheng* then returned to the Gulf of Aden to resume its anti-piracy mission and rejoin *Luoyang* and *Taihu*.<sup>46</sup> In total, they escorted 132 ships in 40 groups.<sup>47</sup>

Already well past the six-to-seven months typical of a PRC naval escort task force, Li Pengcheng's global mission was not yet complete. After being relieved by the 17<sup>th</sup> task force, Senior Captain Li and his ships commenced a circuitous transit back to China. Li's 16<sup>th</sup> escort task force proceeded to

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<sup>40</sup> Rong and Li, "An Unusual Voyage," p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> 胡全福、李晓 [Hu Quanfu and Li Xiaoxiao], 执行为运输叙利亚化学武器船只护航任务—我海军盐城舰抵达塞浦路斯 ["Carrying out the Escort Mission for Ships Transporting Syrian Chemical Weapons—The Chinese Navy Ship *Yancheng* Arrived in Cyprus"] 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], 7 January 2014, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Rong and Li, "An Unusual Voyage," p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> 荣俊杰、李晓 [Rong Junjie and Li Xiao], 中俄进行第二轮叙化武海运护航联合训练战术磋商 ["China and Russia Hold Second Round of Joint Training and Tactical Consultations on the Maritime Escort of Syrian Chemical Weapons"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], 27 January 2014, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> 孟娜、徐剑梅 [Meng Na, and Xu Jianmei], 习近平和普京共同与参加叙利亚化学武器海运联合护航的中俄军舰舰长视频通话 ["Xi Jinping and Putin Share a Video Call with the Captains of Chinese and Russian Warships Participating in the Joint Escort of Maritime Shipment of Syrian Chemical Weapons"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 7 February 2014, p. 1, [https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2014-02/07/content\\_2580812.htm](https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2014-02/07/content_2580812.htm). For Xi's personal greetings to Li and his crew, see also "Chinese Warship Fulfills Third Mission of Escorting Syria's Chemical Weapons Shipping," *China Military Online*, 12 February 2014, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2014-02/12/content\\_5767470.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2014-02/12/content_5767470.htm); Erickson and Strange, *Six Years at Sea...*, pp. 145–46.

<sup>45</sup> 徐广、李晓 [Xu Guang and Li Xiao], 盐城舰与黄山舰完成任务交接 ["The Ship *Yancheng* Completes Mission Handover with the Ship *Huangshan*"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], 10 March 2014, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Rong and Li, "An Unusual Voyage," p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Erickson and Strange, *Six Years at Sea...*, p. 76.

enter the Atlantic Ocean and circumnavigate Africa with sequential port calls in Tunisia, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Cameroon, Angola, Namibia, and South Africa. The eighth and final port call in Cape Town, South Africa concluded on 20 June 2014 before the task force rounded the Cape of Good Hope and headed homeward across the Indian Ocean.<sup>48</sup> Several of these port visits were notable in that they represented the first time that PLAN warships had ever called there.<sup>49</sup> On 18 July 2014, Li and his fellow crewmembers completed a record-setting deployment that had garnered the PRC paramount leader's personal attention and yielded a wealth of international experience. Li was certainly an officer on the rise, the only question was where and how far he would go.



Figure 3: In a PLAN first, Senior Captain Li Pengcheng arrives in Cameroon following the 16<sup>th</sup> escort task force anti-piracy deployment.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> 荣俊杰、李晓 [Rong Junjie and Li Xiao], “第十六批护航舰队结束访问南非启程回国” [Sixteenth Escort Fleet Concludes Visit to South Africa and Departs for Home], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 23 June 2014, p. 4; “中国海军第十六批护航编队完成任务返回青岛” [16th Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Returns to Qingdao After Completing Missions], 中国新闻网 [China News Net], 18 July 2014, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/mil/2014/07-18/6402817.shtml>.

<sup>49</sup> 荣俊杰、李晓、胡全福 [Rong Junjie, Li Xiao, and Hu Quanfu], “我海军舰艇编队首次访问喀麦隆” [China's Naval Task Force Visits Cameroon for the First Time], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 4 June 2014, p. 4; “Chinese Naval Fleet Pays First Visit to Cameroon,” *China Military Online*, 3 June 2014, copy on file with authors.

<sup>50</sup> “中国海军舰艇编队首次抵喀麦隆进行友好访问” [Chinese Naval Fleet Arrives in Cameroon for First-Ever Friendly Visit], 新浪军事 [Sina Military], 1 June 2014, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2014-06-01/1210782383.html>.



Figure 4: Senior Captain Li Pengcheng presents a copy of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* to South African Rear Admiral 'Rusty' Higgs during the 16<sup>th</sup> escort task force's return transit.<sup>51</sup>

Sailing high, Li penned a by-name article featured prominently in *People's Navy*, where the top brass would all have seen it. "Escorting in the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters is the longest, largest, and most troop-intensive overseas operation since the founding of the People's Navy" in 1949, he began. "From the first step at the end of 2008 to the gradual normalization in the past five years, the escort methods have been continuously expanded, the escort means have been continuously innovated, and the significance of escorting has become increasingly profound." The next four paragraphs were packed with flowery prose and Party platitudes, precisely the sort of officially sanctioned virtue signaling that powers promotion to higher levels.<sup>52</sup>

### The Beginning of the End?

Following Li's return from his celebrated African circumnavigation, he was assigned to serve as Director of the Navy's Equipment Research Academy.<sup>53</sup> There, Li could oversee the development of the most modern PLAN weapons and their integration with new platforms and other systems.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> 编队指挥员李鹏程大校向南非海军希格斯少将赠送礼物《孙子兵法》。["Task Force Commander Senior Captain Li Pengcheng Presented Rear Admiral Higgs, South African Navy, With a Copy of *Sun Tzu's Art of War*"], 张洁娴 摄 [Photo by Zhang Jiexian], 高清: 海军舰艇编队访问南非 导弹护卫舰对公众开放 ["High Resolution: Navy Task Force Visits South Africa, Missile Frigates Open to Public"], 人民网 [People's Net], 18 June 2014, <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2014/0618/c1011-25162608-13.html>. See also Dean Wingrin, "Chinese Navy Escort Task Group visits Cape Town," *DefenceWeb*, 18 June 2014, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/sea/sea-sea/chinese-navy-escort-task-group-visits-cape-town/>.

<sup>52</sup> 第十六批护航编队指挥员李鹏程 [Li Pengcheng, Commander of the 16th Escort Task Force], 新起点上谱写新篇章 ["Writing a New Chapter from a New Starting Point"], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 16 December 2013, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> "李鹏程" [Li Pengcheng], *Baidu*, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/李鹏程/16522294>. For background, see Kenneth Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People's Liberation Army's Academic Institutions* (Maxwell, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 11 June 2020), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2216778/the-peoples-liberation-armys-academic-institutions/>.

<sup>54</sup> 梁庆松 [Liang Qingsong], 吴胜利苗华到清华大学调研: 深入贯彻习主席重大战略决策, 努力推动军民融合深度发展—田中杜景臣蒋伟烈刘毅丁毅王登平杨世光徐卫兵王建国参加 杜占元邱勇陈旭陪同 ["Wu Shengli and Miao Hua

Corruption appears to have been a preexisting challenge prior to Li's arrival at the Academy. In February 2013, the Academy appointed 101 officers, soldiers, and staff members to serve as anticorruption supervisors at the parent organization and all of its research components.<sup>55</sup> Employees had apparently inflated travel expense reports, prompting the Institute to implement administrative changes requiring personnel to receive prior approval and to conduct post-event reporting for travel.<sup>56</sup> Such accounts suggest that opportunities for corruption existed, and that Li could have run into trouble while serving as President of the Academy. Regardless of what transpired, Li was promoted to Rear Admiral while serving at the Academy's helm.

On 29 December 2014, the now-recently-purged PLAN Political Commissar Miao Hua presided over Li's promotion to Rear Admiral.<sup>57</sup> While PRC sources remain silent on the relationship between the two Admirals, Miao would have been intimately involved in Li's selection for promotion to the flag officer ranks, and hence Li could have appeared to be part of his overreaching patronage network. Although Admiral Miao would be expected to attend such a ceremony as a matter of course, his presence indicates at a minimum that the two admirals knew each other professionally and raises the possibility that their respective removals may have been linked in some way.

Li would go on to several other command roles before achieving what would prove in retrospect to be his apogee career positions. By 15 March 2024 he had been promoted to the rank of Vice Admiral (two-star), together with a simultaneous grade promotion as the Southern TC Navy Commander and concurrent Southern TC Deputy Commander.<sup>58</sup> More symbolically, he served as one of the 2,977 deputies selected for the 14<sup>th</sup> NPC on 25 February 2023.<sup>59</sup> His speech at China's rubber-stamp parliament focused on military-civil fusion (MCF/军民融合) and linked PRC modernization to the marriage of military and civilian strategies. While Beijing's MCF development strategy enjoys tremendous leadership emphasis, its operationalization is rife with corruption due to the nature of contracts and other financial links between the military and civil society—which offer large,

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Visited Tsinghua University for Research: Deeply implement the Major Strategic Decisions of President Xi, Strive to Promote the in-depth Development of Military-Civilian Integration—Tian Zhong, Du Jingchen, Jiang Weilie, Liu Yi, Ding Yi, Wang Dengping, Yang Shiguang, Xu Weibing, and Wang Jianguo Attended; Du Zhanyuan, Qiu Yong, and Chen Xu Accompanied”, 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], 30 March 2015, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> 王英超、余华梁 [Wang Yingchao and Yu Hualiang], 海军装备研究院 聘任百名廉政监督员 [“Naval Equipment Research Academy Appoints 100 Anticorruption Supervisors”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 21 February 2013, p. 2, <http://fanfu.people.com.cn/n/2013/0221/c64371-20557179.html>.

<sup>56</sup> 王英超、余华梁 [Wang Yingchao and Yu Hualiang], 海军装备研究院完善制度加强流动党员干部管理 [“Naval Equipment Research Academy Improves System to Strengthen Management of Mobile Party Members and Cadres”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 27 June 2014, p. 2, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2014-06-27/0530787126.html>.

<sup>57</sup> 海军隆重举行将官军衔晋升仪式, 吴胜利宣读命令 苗华主持仪式 [“The Navy held a Grand Ceremony to Promote Officers to the Rank of Admiral: Wu Shengli Read Out the Order and Miao Hua Presided over the Ceremony”], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], 30 December 2014, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> “李鹏程将军, 履任新职” [Admiral Li Pengcheng, Taking Up a New Post], 15 March 2024,

<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1793555102228275440>.

<sup>59</sup> “中华人民共和国第十四届全国人民代表大会代表名单” [List of Deputies to the 14<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China], 人民网—人民日报 [*People's Daily Online*], <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0225/c1001-32630907.html>; 深刻把握强国强军面临的新形势新任务新要求 努力开创一体化国家战略体系和能力建设新局面 [“Deeply Grasping the New Situation, New Tasks and New Requirements for Strengthening the Nation and the Military, and Striving to Create a New Situation of Integrated National Strategic System and Capacity Building”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 9 March 2023, p. 6, [https://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/1/2023-03/09/07/2023030907\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/1/2023-03/09/07/2023030907_pdf.pdf); [http://www.lvliang.gov.cn/zfjgzd/ljsjrj/qjxs/202303/t20230309\\_1742762.html](http://www.lvliang.gov.cn/zfjgzd/ljsjrj/qjxs/202303/t20230309_1742762.html).

tempting revenue streams and other resources to exploit. PRC sources, however, remain silent on Li's specific role in advancing this strategy.

### **Admiral Ju Xinchun: Similar Rise, Fall, Replaceability**

Vice Admiral Li is impressive but not irreplaceable. In fact, Li himself replaced a standout similarly dismissed from the 14<sup>th</sup> NPC on 27 November 2023: Vice Admiral Ju Xinchun.<sup>60</sup> Born in August 1965, Ju hailed from Qingzhou, Shandong province. Ju distinguished himself initially through foreign engagements, then through strategic capabilities management involving Equipment Department leadership, which offered him unusual proximity to PRC resources—the access to which is a disproportionate source of graft allegations.<sup>61</sup>

A master's degree holder who received professional military education in Europe, Ju worked his way up through various levels of leadership positions on different types of ships. In 2004, as a Captain, Ju served as Commanding Officer of the highly-decorated ship *Harbin* when it participated in a joint exercise with the French Navy.<sup>62</sup>

On 30 September 2015, the South Sea Fleet held a conference to convey and implement the spirit of the PLAN's top-level grassroots work conference. This was apparently Senior Captain Ju's first public appearance as Director of the South Sea Fleet's Equipment Department.<sup>63</sup> Ju replaced Wang Yu (汪玉), who had been dismissed for "serious violations of discipline and suspected crimes" (严重

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<sup>60</sup> “(受权发布) 全国人民代表大会常务委员会公告 (十四届) 第二号” [(Authorized for Release) Announcement of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (14th Session) No. 2], 新华网 [Xinhua Net], 29 December 2024, <http://www.news.cn/politics/20231229/008dddc4119c42c48e7046cflca191bc/c.html>, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231229144912/http://www.news.cn/politics/20231229/008dddc4119c42c48e7046cflca191bc/c.html>; 中华人民共和国全国人民代表大会常务委员会公报 [Communiqué of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China], 15 January 2024, <http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzlhgb/c27214/gb2024/202402/P020240202330064224451.pdf>, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240202103452/http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzlhgb/c27214/gb2024/202402/P020240202330064224451.pdf>;

<sup>61</sup> For background, see Kenneth W. Allen, “PLA Logistics, Equipment, and Support Organizational Structure Overview,” *PLA Logistics and Sustainment: PLA Conference 2022*, 3 February 2023, pp. 1–16, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep47249.6?seq=2>; 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/>.

<sup>62</sup> 新闻背景: 中法海军联合演习参演舰艇介绍 [“News Background: Introduction to the Ships Participating in the Sino-French Joint Naval Exercise”], 新华网 [Xinhua Net], 16 March 2004, <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2004-03-16/10312060985s.shtml>; 米晋国, 于晓波, 薄克国 [Mi Jinguo, Yu Xiaobo, and Bo Keguo], 跨过海洋握手——中法海军海上联合演习纪实 [“Handshake Across the Ocean: A Record of the Sino-French Joint Naval Exercise”], 大众日报 [Dazhong Daily], 17 March 2004, <https://www.dzwww.com/xinwen/shandongxinwen/zbrb/200403170623.htm>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20240204064538/https://www.dzwww.com/xinwen/shandongxinwen/zbrb/200403170623.htm>

<sup>63</sup> 岳怀让、实习生、周航 [Yue Huairang, Shi Shisheng, and Zhou Hang], 海军南海舰队人事调整: 李玉杰鞠新春分任参谋长、装备部部长 [“Personnel Adjustments in the South Sea Fleet: Li Yujie and Ju Xinchun Serve as Chief of Staff and Director of Equipment Department, Respectively”], 澎湃新闻 [Pengpai News], 8 October 2015, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1382843](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1382843); [https://web.archive.org/web/20200721115111/https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1382843](https://web.archive.org/web/20200721115111/https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1382843).

违纪、涉嫌犯罪). On 28 September 2015, the PLAN Selection Committee had accepted Wang's resignation as a representative of the 12<sup>th</sup> NPC.<sup>64</sup>

On 27 April 2016, Ju became Deputy Commander of the then-South Sea Fleet.<sup>65</sup> In 2021, Ju served concurrently as Vice Minister of the CMC's Equipment Development Department (装备发展部副部长), Deputy Commander-in-Chief of China's Manned Space Program, and Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the General Command of Space Station Stage Missions.<sup>66</sup>



Figure 5: Admiral Ju Xinchun transfers the Party flag carried aboard the *Shenzhou 12* manned spacecraft to Wu Xiangdong, Secretary of the Party Committee and Director of the CCP History Exhibition Center on 4 November 2021.<sup>67</sup>

With this track record in managing strategic technology under his belt, Ju was promoted to Vice Admiral in February 2023 and returned to the South China Sea area of operations (AOR) as STC

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<sup>64</sup> 蒋子文、实习生、张巧雨 [Jiang Ziwen, Shi Shisheng, and Zhang Qiaoyu], 石志坤大校任海军南海舰队装备部部长 [“Senior Colonel Shi Zhikun Appointed Director of the Equipment Department of the Navy's South Sea Fleet”], 澎湃新闻 [Pengpai News], 28 April 2016, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1462398](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1462398).

<sup>65</sup> 鞠新春少将调任中国海军南海舰队副司令员 [“Rear Admiral Ju Xinchun Transferred to Serve as Deputy Commander of the Chinese Navy's South China Sea Fleet”], 澎湃新闻 [Pengpai News], 2 July 2018, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_2232646](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2232646); <https://web.archive.org/web/20220608090108/https://mil.sina.cn/2018-07-02/detail-ihespqry4533831.d.html?from=wap>; <https://mil.sina.cn/2018-07-02/detail-ihespqry4533831.d.html?from=wap>.

<sup>66</sup> 神舟十二号载人飞船搭载党旗交中国共产党历史展览馆收藏展示 [“The Party Flag Carried Aboard the *Shenzhou XII* Manned Spacecraft was Handed Over to the Exhibition Hall of the CCP History for Collection and Display”], 中国载人航天工程办公室官方账号 [Official account of China Manned Spaceflight Engineering Office], 4 November 2021, [https://web.archive.org/web/20230329093611/https://view.inews.qq.com/k/20211104A07BAT00?web\\_channel=wap&openApp=false](https://web.archive.org/web/20230329093611/https://view.inews.qq.com/k/20211104A07BAT00?web_channel=wap&openApp=false).

<sup>67</sup> 神舟十二号载人飞船搭载党旗交中国共产党历史展览馆收藏展示 [“The Party Flag Carried Aboard the *Shenzhou XII* Manned Spacecraft was Handed Over to the Exhibition Hall of the CCP History for Collection and Display”], 中国载人航天工程办公室官方账号 [Official account of China Manned Spaceflight Engineering Office], 4 November 2021, [https://web.archive.org/web/20230329093611/https://view.inews.qq.com/k/20211104A07BAT00?web\\_channel=wap&openApp=false](https://web.archive.org/web/20230329093611/https://view.inews.qq.com/k/20211104A07BAT00?web_channel=wap&openApp=false).

Naval Commander.<sup>68</sup> He served in this position for over a year before his dismissal—paving the way for Admiral Li to replace him.

### **Corruption’s Impact: More Continuity than Disruption**

The fight against corruption within the CCP has Xi’s personal attention and appears to be picking up steam for 2025. According to a 28 December 2024 *People’s Daily* article, Xi delivered comments at a meeting of the CCP Central Committee on 26–27 December, in which he stated, “As long as the soil and conditions for breeding corruption still exist, the fight against corruption will always be on the way. We should be extremely sober and resolute in the situation of the fight against corruption.”<sup>69</sup> Both civilian and military leaders will most certainly be caught up in further efforts, particularly since corruption is endemic to the PRC system, is sometimes intertwined with chronic elite power struggles, and can by no means be eradicated so long as the Party remains in power.<sup>70</sup>

Li’s dismissal may have been a part of Xi’s renewed anti-corruption campaign. It is possible that his removal represents collateral damage caused by the suspension of CMC member Miao Hua. As explained previously, the two Admirals were professionally linked and may have been part of the same patronage network. They would certainly have crossed paths professionally while they both served at PLAN HQ. In his capacity as Director of the CMC Political Work Department, Admiral Miao would have had to approve and support Li’s appointment to his leadership roles in the STC. Their near-simultaneous purges support the hypothesis that these removals are somehow linked. The announcement of Admiral Miao’s suspension came on 28 November 2024. Three days earlier, PLAN representatives to the NPC held a meeting to remove Vice Admiral Li from his military positions and as a deputy to the 14<sup>th</sup> NPC.<sup>71</sup> Major leadership shuffles do not occur in a vacuum. The PLAN delegates would certainly have been apprised of the pending announcement of Miao’s suspension when they dismissed Li.

The overall picture is one of individual offramps but collective advancement. China’s navy may be playing high-stakes musical chairs, but it has a deep enough bench of talent to do so without prohibitive costs. While the name of Li’s replacement is not yet publicly available, there is every reason to believe that the next officer in that position will be similarly qualified. Just as Ju became Director of the then-South Sea Fleet’s Equipment Department after his predecessor’s dismissal for corruption and Li seamlessly replaced Ju as Commander of STC PLAN forces following Ju’s removal, another superstar has been waiting in the wings to advance the PLAN STC’s operational capabilities and modernization objectives. Despite this leadership churn, PLAN operational

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<sup>68</sup> [军事报道] 习近平在视察南部战区海军时强调 深化练兵备战 加快转型建设 全面提高部队现代化水平, [(Military Report) Xi Jinping Stresses Deepening Training and Preparation for Battle, Accelerating Transformation and Construction, and Comprehensively Improving Modernization of Forces During Inspection of Southern Theater Command Navy], *CCTV*, 21 April 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230412121005/https://tv.cctv.com/2023/04/12/VIDEY3WsvGXnqH8rev9NSPZR230412.shtml?spm=C52346.PiumOrlYLNUM.E0VXtwLj8YU7.2>.

<sup>69</sup> 中共中央政治局召开民主生活会强调, 巩固深化党纪学习教育成果 在加强党的纪律建设上发挥示范引领作用, 中共中央总书记习近平主持会议并发表重要讲话 [“The Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee Held a Democratic Life Meeting and Emphasized: Consolidating and Deepening the Achievements of Learning and Education on Party Discipline Playing an Exemplary Leading Role in Strengthening Party Discipline Construction; Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee, Presided over the Meeting and Delivered an Important Speech”], *人民日报* [*People’s Daily*], 28 December 2024, p. 1, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2024/1228/c64094-40391206.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Erickson, “Admiral Wang Renhua: Exemplifying Jointness and Oversight for China’s Navy amid Xi’s Grade-and-Rank Reforms.”

<sup>71</sup> NPC Qualification Report.



capabilities have demonstrated more continuity than disruption. There is little evidence to suggest that PLAN capabilities or operations are slowing in the STC AOR—rather, all available evidence suggests that STC naval forces’ capabilities and operations in fact remain ascendant.

### **STC PLAN Operations Today**

Recent PLAN dual-carrier operations in the STC AOR are evidence of advancing operational capabilities despite leadership shuffles. On 31 October 2024, aircraft carriers *Shandong* and *Liaoning* conducted dual formation exercises in the South China Sea for the first time, including combat-realistic training.<sup>72</sup> Dual-carrier operations demonstrate that the PLAN is advancing toward maneuvers at scale applicable to a major conflict. The exercises showcased two floating military airports, offering redundancy and empowering the PLAN to expand the scope of operations if necessary. With two aircraft carriers, more aircraft sorties are available, enabling the PLAN to increase dwell time and mission endurance. Dual-carrier operations are also more complex than single-carrier operations. They impose unforgiving requirements that must be mastered without fail: central air and water space management as well as deconfliction of communications and sensor frequencies to avoid mutual interference.

The PLAN’s dual-carrier formation exercise in the South China Sea, which included realistic combat training, occurred just twenty-five days before Li’s dismissal from the PLAN.<sup>73</sup> The investigation into Li certainly was ongoing then, if not already complete. Nevertheless, the PLAN demonstrated its proficiency at executing these unprecedented operations in the STC AOR while this leadership turmoil was ongoing, still within the recent memory of Admiral Ju’s termination one year prior. These dynamics appear to indicate that the loss of one or two commanders due to official corruption neither will compromise the PLAN’s forward surge nor are indicative of systemic weakness overall.

The 9 September 2024 video call between U.S. INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Samuel Paparo and STC Commander General Wu Yanan provides further evidence of operational continuity in the STC. During the call, Admiral Paparo urged the PLA to “reconsider its use of dangerous, coercive, and potentially escalatory tactics in the South China Sea and beyond.”<sup>74</sup> These issues raised by Admiral Paparo are consistent with longstanding U.S. government official reporting about PRC behavior in waters proximate to China—specifically, the South China Sea.<sup>75</sup> The official INDOPACOM readout of this video conversation did not mention any significant changes to PLA maritime or air activity, nor improved safety measures or other operational adjustments. This all suggests that despite PLAN leadership shakeups, PLAN operations remain consistent, e.g., as supported by the manning, training, and equipping responsibilities of the STC Navy Commander—albeit often coercive and dangerous.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Huaxia, “Chinese Navy Conducts Dual Aircraft Carrier Formation Exercise for First Time,” *Xinhua*, 31 October 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20241031/50fbbabe265f4d9f88ce4cb8412fc3e8/c.html>.

<sup>73</sup> NPC Qualification Report.

<sup>74</sup> U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Public Affairs, “Readout of Commander U.S. Indo-Pacific Command call with PLA Southern Theater Commander,” *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*, 9 September 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3900303/readout-of-commander-us-indo-pacific-command-call-with-pla-southern-theater-com/>.

<sup>75</sup> CMPR 2024, p. 18.

<sup>76</sup> For the nature and intent of relevant operations, see Ryan D. Martinson and Conor Kennedy, “Using the Enemy to Train the Troops—Beijing’s New Approach to Prepare its Navy for War,” *Center for International Maritime Security*

Four days after Admiral Li was terminated, STC naval forces conducted combat readiness patrols in the waters and airspace surrounding Scarborough Shoal. The PLA showcases these patrols as one of its “Top 10” news stories of the year for 2024. These patrols followed the PRC’s official delimitation of baselines of Beijing-claimed territorial seas adjacent to Scarborough Shoal on 10 November 2024.<sup>77</sup> Since December, the STC has “continuously” conducted naval and air combat readiness patrols around Scarborough Shoal.<sup>78</sup> According to China’s nationalistic *Global Times*, these patrols differ from routine training in that personnel and equipment are at full combat readiness.<sup>79</sup>

Publishing the PRC’s claimed baselines around Scarborough Shoal and the subsequent regular combat readiness patrols conveys military determination and operational fortitude. The PLAN would likely be called on to provide a disproportionate number of platforms and assets to execute any potential military operations in the area. Beijing’s willingness to up the ante and employ its STC PLAN forces to convey this threat suggests that these forces’ readiness for conflict may have increased since Li’s removal. At a minimum, it is evidence that Li’s termination has not adversely impacted the PLAN’s operational capabilities.

### **Conclusion: Individual Offramps, Collective Advancement**

What then does the case study of Li’s removal tell us more broadly about how flag officer removals affect the PLAN? First, it demonstrates that the PLAN’s leadership pool is deep. When one leader is purged, another is on deck. The Gulf of Aden escort missions alone have helped to raise numerous PLAN senior officers with real world operational experience and international exposure. Since 26 December 2008, forty-seven task forces averaging three ships each have deployed over 150 vessels and well over 30,000 naval (including Marine Corps) personnel.<sup>80</sup> These missions often push PLAN Commanders beyond their comfort zone, such as when Li confronted command-and-control challenges when his formation was bifurcated in support of divergent national-level priorities. To identify future PLAN leaders, one should start with a catalog of the officers who commanded escort task forces, as they have already received a significant vote of confidence and embody many of the characteristics the PLAN desires for its future leaders. With this deep bench, Xi can afford to place the leaders he wants into positions of power rather than resigning himself to leaders selected by the navy, or factions within it. To use the Maoist analogy, he can select for both “redness” and

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(CIMSEC), 17 January 2023, <https://cimsec.org/using-the-enemy-to-train-the-troops-beijings-new-approach-to-prepare-its-navy-for-war/>.

<sup>77</sup> Li Jiayao, editor, “CMG: Top 10 Military News Stories from China and the World in 2024,” *CGTN*, 29 December 2024, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/Features\\_209191/16361653.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Features_209191/16361653.html).

<sup>78</sup> Li Jiayao, editor, “China Conducts Combat Readiness Patrols in Territorial Waters and Airspace of Huangyan Dao,” *China Military Online*, 29 December 2024, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16361632.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16361632.html).

<sup>79</sup> Liu Caiyu and Liu Xuanzun, “Chinese Military Conducts Combat Readiness Patrols over Huangyan Dao, ‘A Message to Provocation-seeking Countries’,” *Global Times*, 29 December 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202412/1325949.shtml>.

<sup>80</sup> The first 36 task forces deployed 27,421 personnel for an average crew of 761.7 per task force. Among task forces 37-47 for which statistics are available, crew size is 700. Assuming that figure as the average yields 7,000 crewmembers over the past ten task forces, for an estimated total of 34,421 personnel over the first 47 task forces. Crew and ship figures compiled as of 9 January 2025 at 中国人民解放军海军索马里护航行动 [“Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy Somalia Escort Operation”], <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-my/中国人民解放军海军索马里护航行动>.

expertise.<sup>81</sup> Even the most talented and capable officers will be sacked if there is sufficient evidence of corruption or other failure in a way that threatens Xi's objectives.

Second, politicized corruption investigations and their imposition of costs are fundamentally a speedbump rather than a showstopper.<sup>82</sup> There appears to be minimal, if any, operational impact on the PLAN's forces when its leaders are purged. STC Navy operations were relatively consistent prior to, during, and after, Li's ouster. Recent patrols around Scarborough Shoal following his removal suggest that PLAN STC operational readiness may actually have increased. Extrapolating this lesson to other theater commands offers the conclusion that the PLAN's operational and capability development does not depend on complete continuity of its leadership.

Third, more PLAN leadership removals are coming. While the STC Navy has experienced the defenestration of Vice Admirals Ju and Li in relatively rapid succession, other commands are not immune. Purges at PLAN HQ in Beijing or at the other Theater Command Navies (Northern and Eastern) are certainly possible. One would expect similar purges by default; however, politics and loyalty to Xi also come into play and may not be as much of an issue in those particular commands—time will tell. Xi's recent comments about corruption and his demonstrated willingness to knock Admiral Miao off his privileged perch on the CMC suggests that additional PLAN fallout will be forthcoming. Of possible significance, Admiral Dong Jun has still not been accorded two valuable positions that his predecessors enjoyed: membership on the CMC and State Council.<sup>83</sup> And, despite PLAN Political Commissar Yuan Huazhi (袁华智) having an inherently high-profile public role, the authors can find no public appearance or statement on his part more recent than 7 September 2024—an extraordinary gap.<sup>84</sup>

Admiral Yuan was absent from meetings he should have attended subsequently, including at events of utmost importance that cluster from the end of the calendar year to the runup to the Lunar New Year. For instance, Yuan was not visible at the All-Military Combined Arms Training Meeting in October 2024.<sup>85</sup> He was likewise not visible at the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission Expanded Meeting (中央军委纪委扩大会) on 10 January 2025, an important and particularly relevant event for political commissars, many of whom attended.<sup>86</sup> General He Weidong, second

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<sup>81</sup> "Red and Expert," *The Center for Strategic Translation*, <https://www.strategictranslation.org/glossary/red-and-expert>.

<sup>82</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, "What the Pentagon's New Report on Chinese Military Power Reveals About Capabilities, Context, and Consequences," *War on the Rocks*, 19 December 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/12/what-the-pentagons-new-report-on-chinese-military-power-reveals-about-capabilities-context-and-consequences/>.

<sup>83</sup> Yuanyue Dang, "What Will 2025 Bring for China's Defence Minister Dong Jun and Military Diplomacy?" *South China Morning Post*, 12 January 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3294364/what-will-2025-bring-chinas-defence-minister-dong-jun-and-military-diplomacy>.

<sup>84</sup> For Yuan's last known public appearance as PLAN Political Commissar, see [视频]张又侠在全军高级干部专题研讨班交流总结时强调 坚决贯彻落实新时代政治建军方略 为奋进强军一流提供坚强政治保证 ["Video: Zhang Youxia Emphasized in the Summary of the All-Military Special Seminar for Senior Military Cadres That We Must Resolutely Implement the Strategy of Building the Military Politically in the New Era and Provide a Strong Political Guarantee for Striving to Build a First-Class Military"], 央视网 [CCTV.com], 22:13, 7 September 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/09/07/VIDEuvpIRTqrAALkMoGYoi6v240907.shtml>.

<sup>85</sup> [视频]全军合成训练现场会召开 张又侠出席并讲话 ["Video: The On-Site All-Military Combined Arms Training Meeting Was Held. Zhang Youxia Attended and Delivered a Speech"], 央视网 [CCTV.com], 22:17, 22 October 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/10/22/VIDEqFCmmhGvEexcOoa43PvJ241022.shtml>.

<sup>86</sup> [正午国防军事]何卫东在出席中央军委纪委扩大会议时强调 深入推进全面从严治党全面从严治军 为打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战提供坚强保障 ["Noon National Defense and Military: He Weidong Emphasized at the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission Expanded Meeting That We Should Deepen the Comprehensive and Strict Governance

CMC Vice Chairman and a member of the CCP’s powerful twenty-four-member Politburo, delivered a speech stressing the importance of achieving Xi’s Centennial Military Building Goal of 2027, in part through unremitting anticorruption efforts. General He emphasized that “the discipline inspection and supervision work of the entire military has achieved new results and progress in the past year. This year, we must deepen political training, rectify work styles and fight corruption, strengthen political supervision, correct the atmosphere of selecting and employing people, crack down on corruption and punish evil with high pressure....” Amid a plethora of repetitively reinforcing Party phraseology, General He stressed, “We must promote the courage not to be corrupt, the inability to be corrupt, and the unwillingness to be corrupt.”<sup>87</sup> This would seem to be an “if you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu” type of event, and political commissars in good standing would naturally want to be seen at the outset of the new year-long campaign to fight corruption.



Figure 6: PLAN Political Commissar Admiral Yuan Huazhi (front row, third from right) at the All-Military Special Seminar for Senior Military Cadres on 7 September 2024.<sup>88</sup>

Unfolding developments will clarify what Yuan’s absences may mean. Meanwhile, observers would be wise to temper broad generalizations about the impact of removals to date and the possible influence of potential forthcoming personnel adjustments on the PLAN.

Finally, this case study highlights the pervasiveness of corruption within the PLAN. While our focus here has been the recent purges of STC PLAN leadership, their assignments outside the STC

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of the Party and the Military, and Provide Strong Guarantees for the Battle to Achieve the Centennial Military Building Goal”], 央视网 [CCTV.com], 12:50, 11 January 2025, <https://tv.cctv.cn/2025/01/11/VIDEL5WBZ1uYEWMIit6oxNYV250111.shtml>.

<sup>87</sup> 梅常伟 [Mei Changwei], 何卫东在出席中央军委纪委扩大会议时强调 深入推进全面从严治党全面从严治军 为打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战提供坚强保障 [“He Weidong Stressed at the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission Expanded Meeting That We Should Deepen the Comprehensive and Strict Governance of the Party and the Military, and Provide Strong Guarantees for the Battle to Achieve the Centennial Military Building Goal”], 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], 10 January 2025, [http://www.81.cn/yw\\_208727/16363767.html](http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16363767.html).

<sup>88</sup> “Video: Zhang Youxia Emphasized in the Summary of the All-Military Special Seminar for Senior Military Cadres That We Must Resolutely Implement the Strategy of Building the Military Politically in the New Era and Provide a Strong Political Guarantee for Striving to Build a First-Class Military,” 22:13.

highlight various corruption opportunities that PLAN leaders face more broadly, such as at research organizations. Further investigation could examine the potential roads to perdition as a PLA(N) flag or general officer under Xi. There are at least three potential tracks to removal.

- First, graft or other violations of regulations and discipline sufficiently dramatic to undermine preparations for priority missions—as may have ensnared Li, Ju, and others with access to significant programmatic resources in Equipment Departments.
- Second, development of personal patronage networks that risk becoming alternative “mountaintops” of power threatening loyalty to Xi; no amount of overt sycophancy can render any political empire builder non-threatening to him.
- And third, joining ranks with what may be an emerging contingent of officers who run afoul of Xi’s ambitious defense objectives (e.g., his 2027 Centennial Military Building Goal—as emphasized recently by General He—and its application first and foremost to Taiwan) by either questioning their realism in practice, or failing to deliver the components need to operationalize them on the timeline Xi envisions.

For the PLAN today and for the foreseeable future, corruption is neither an indicator of prohibitive incompetence nor a self-defeating constraint on operational capabilities. From a big picture perspective, it is business not (individual) personnel. Despite corruption’s persistent pervasiveness and its alleged manifestations and their personal repercussions, PLAN operational capabilities continue to improve, and new cutting-edge, lethal weapons systems regularly enter service. Corruption may contribute to inefficiencies, but it does not curtail PLAN advances. On the positive side of its ledger, China’s navy is making concerted efforts to be able to deliver maximum lethality where it matters most for the missions for which it is ordered to prepare. In one of many examples, during his tenure as president of the Naval Command College in Nanjing (2011–15)—the closest equivalent to the U.S. Naval War College—then-Rear Admiral Shen Jinlong (later PLAN commander, 2017–21) radically increased the realism of, and emphasis on, wargaming.<sup>89</sup> Today students enrolled in the NCC’s midcareer command courses engage in extensive wargaming, most importantly through an annual capstone graduation exercise. Some scenarios focus on the South China Sea, all are bore-sighted on what China’s Navy should do operationally—not in cooperation but in combat.<sup>90</sup> As we enter the Year of the Snake, the PLAN will continue significant development and activity in the South China Sea and beyond. That is the bigger picture that we must keep front of mind.

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<sup>89</sup> Andrew S. Erickson and Kenneth Allen, “China’s Navy Gets a New Helmsman (Part 1): Spotlight on Vice Admiral Shen Jinlong,” Jamestown *China Brief* 17.3 (2 March 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-navy-gets-new-helmsman-part-1-spotlight-vice-admiral-shen-jinlong/>; Andrew S. Erickson and Kenneth Allen, “China’s Navy Gets a New Helmsman (Part 2): Remaining Uncertainties,” Jamestown *China Brief* 17.4 (14 March 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-navy-gets-new-helmsman-part-2-remaining-uncertainties/>.

<sup>90</sup> Ryan D. Martinson, “The PLA Navy’s Blue Team Center Games for War,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 150.5 (May 2024), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/may/pla-navys-blue-team-center-games-war>.

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