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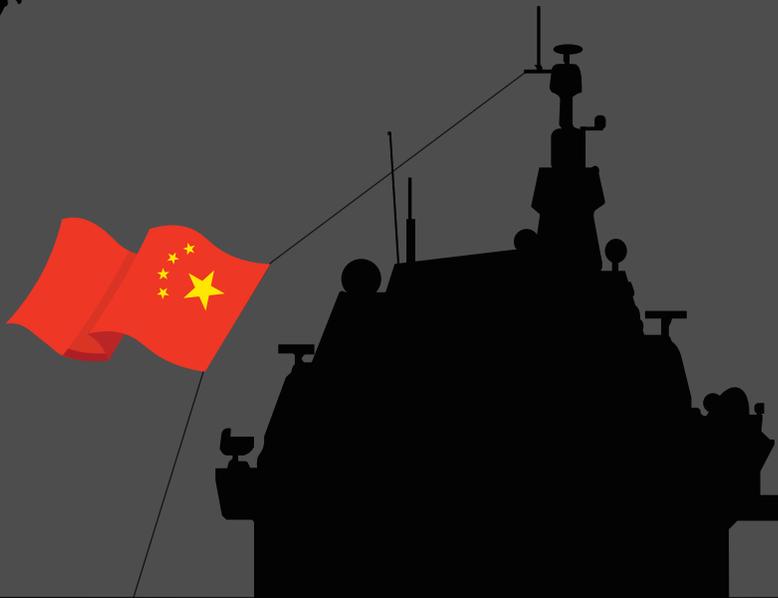
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中国海事研究所
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CMSI Note #17 /// 13 November 2025

Replacement Removed: VADM/General Wang Houbin— Naval Star Turned Rocket Force Commander's Terminal Trajectory

Andrew S. Erickson and Christopher H. Sharman¹

CMSI's Perspectives and Key Takeaways:

- On 17 October, China's Ministry of National Defense announced that General (former Vice Admiral) Wang Houbin (王厚斌), Commander of the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), was among nine senior officers expelled for "serious violations of Party discipline."
- A career naval aviator and seasoned PLA Navy (PLAN) staff officer, Wang rose rapidly—promoted to General (3-star) in 2023 and appointed PLA Rocket Forces (PLARF) Commander to replace disgraced General Li Yuchao.
- The official reason for Wang's downfall—"serious financial crimes involving exceptionally large sums"—echoes a familiar corruption narrative that seldom tells the full story.
- Alternative explanations point to Wang's ties to Admiral Miao Hua, inter-service factionalism, and persistent integrity or capability issues inside the PLARF.
- Despite leadership churn, CMSI sees no evidence that PLA capability development or operational readiness has suffered; any internal "taxes" appear offset by strong central prioritization and resource mobilization.
- PLAN operational forces continue to advance rapidly, sustained by an officer corps that punishes corruption, prizes competence, and rewards performance with honor and responsibility.

Perhaps no other officer more dramatically embodies the vicissitudes of leading military careers under Xi: from excelling on the naval track, to being switched to a different track and anointed at the summit, to devastating derailment. Naval aviator Wang Houbin once had a shot at leading China's Navy, ended up leading the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) instead, and has now been expelled from China's military entirely.

What was increasingly apparent is now official. On Friday, 17 October 2025, China's Ministry of National Defense announced that nine top flag and general officers have been investigated, found guilty of "severe violations of party discipline" and "serious duty-related crimes," and expelled from the military and Party. All nine are accused of extreme corruption: "the sums were

¹ The views expressed here are the authors' alone, based solely on open sources. They do not represent the policies or estimates of the U.S. Navy or any other organization of the U.S. government. They thank Ken Allen and TextOre for research and analytical assistance.

especially large, the nature was extremely serious, and the impact was extremely bad.”² Three have naval backgrounds: Admiral/Former Lieutenant General Miao Hua, former CMC Member and Director, CMC Political Work Department, and PLA Navy (PLAN) Political Commissar;³ Admiral Yuan Huazhi, former PLAN Political Commissar (PC);⁴ and General/Former Vice Admiral Wang Houbin, until recently PLARF Commander. As the trio’s fallen former flag not yet profiled by CMSI, General Wang is this Note’s focus.

Before his failed PLARF Commander capstone assignment, Wang logged a well-rounded PLAN career with no experience commanding frontline units but extensive staff and leadership experience. A native of Dangshan, Anhui Province born in October 1962, Wang joined the PLAN in 1979 and graduated from the Naval Aviation School.⁵ Wang rose systematically from naval aviator to career staff officer. In his early career, Wang served successively as a Naval Aviation pilot; Staff Officer and Branch Director of the Naval Aviation Headquarters; Staff Officer, Deputy Director, and Director of the Operations Department of the Headquarters of the now-defunct General Staff Department (GSD).⁶ For his advanced education, Wang studied at the

² Original Chinese: “数额特别巨大, 性质极为严重, 影响极其恶劣...” “何卫东、苗华等 9 人严重违纪违法被开除党籍军籍” [Nine, Including He Weidong and Miao Hua, Have Been Expelled from the Party and Military for Serious Violations of Discipline and Law], 国防部 [Ministry of National Defense], 17 October 2025, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16416031.html>, <https://web.archive.org/web/20251020143338/http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16416031.html>;

Chun Han Wong, “Xi Removes China’s No. 2 General in Escalating Purge of Military Leadership—Gen. He Weidong is Most Senior Active-Duty Officer to be Taken Down by Chinese Leader’s Campaign,” *Wall Street Journal*, 17 October 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/xi-removes-chinas-no-2-general-in-escalating-purge-of-military-leadership-15eb3dfd>.

³ 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/>.

⁴ Andrew S. Erickson, “Confirmed: ADM Yuan Huazhi Removed as the PLAN’s Political Commissar,” *CMSI Note* 16 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 4 September 2025), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/16/>. Subsequent issues of *People’s Navy* have labeled Yuan’s apparent successor, Leng Shaojie (冷少杰), as Acting PLAN PC.

⁵ “Vice Admiral Wang Houbin, Deputy Commander, Chinese PLA Navy,” biography from 7th International Maritime Security Conference, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 28 July 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20251017222405/https://rsis.edu.sg/research/idss/research-programmes/maritime-security-programme/imsc-2021/>. Many popular sources have reported that Wang was born in 1961. However, Wang’s RSIS biography indicates that he was born in 1962. Presumably the PLAN personnel responsible for foreign affairs shared Wang’s bio with RSIS prior to the event. The following now-deleted WeChat post, which is semi-official at best, appears to be the origin of many assertions that Wang was born in 1961: “王厚斌、徐西盛履任火箭军, 晋升上” [Wang Houbin and Xu Xisheng Have Assumed Their Posts in the PLA Rocket Force and Been Promoted to Senior Ranks], 31 July 2023, 21:54, https://baike.baidu.com/reference/16522330/533aYdO6cr3_z3kATPGCna_1OnmRMdquereHV-BzzqIPmGapB4PIFJ836c828LI2BUXIv5Ute5k0g_qycAsZmY55GZNXMMIhyyeiCVOj. For background on the Naval Aviation School, see Kenneth Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People’s Liberation Army’s 37 Academic Institutions* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 11 June 2020), 30, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Other-Topics/2020-06-11%20PLA%20Academic_Institutions.pdf.

⁶ “Vice Admiral Wang Houbin, Deputy Commander, Chinese PLA Navy,” biography from 7th International Maritime Security Conference.

PLAN's Naval Command College and Italy's Joint Services Staff College and received a Master's degree in Joint Operations.⁷

On 29 December 2014, at a ceremony presided over by PLAN PC Miao Hua, Wang was promoted from Senior Captain (SCPT) to RADM (1-star).⁸ At the time, he was dual-hatted as Deputy Chief of Staff (DCOS), East Sea Fleet (ESF) and Deputy Commander, Zhoushan Base [舟山基地副司令员] (Unit 92269).⁹ He then served as DCOS of the South Sea Fleet (SSF). In July 2016 Wang became SSF Chief of Staff (COS).¹⁰ In August 2017 Wang presided over a grand flag-raising ceremony to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the PLA's founding¹¹ and participated in another, local, ceremony.¹²

In November 2017, Wang headed the first-ever PLAN delegation to the Indian Ocean Naval Forum, in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, winning widespread acclaim.¹³ There, PLAN guided-

⁷ Ibid. "Armed Forces Advanced Staff College" in Wang's bio appears to be a mistranslation of the name of Italy's Joint Services Staff College (ISSMI)—Istituto Superiore di Stato Maggiore Interforze: <https://www.difesa.it/smd/casd/im/issmi/index/32907.html>. ISSMI is the joint staff college within the Centre for Defense Higher Studies (CASD) in Rome. CASD is the Italian Ministry of Defense's top-level defense-education hub.

⁸ 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" [The Admirals of the Naval Headquarters Were Adjusted in Place, And 12 Naval Senior Captains Were Promoted to Rear Admiral], 澎湃新闻 [Pengpai News], 3 January 2015, <https://archive.ph/bw9BL>.

⁹ Ying Yu Lin, "PLA Personnel Shakeups and Their Implications," Jamestown *China Brief* 24.3 (2 February 2024), <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-personnel-shakeups-and-their-implications/>; 岳怀让 蒋子文 [Yue Huairang and Jiang Ziwen], "南海舰队参谋长王厚斌调任海军副参谋长" [Wang Houbin, Chief of Staff of the South China Sea Fleet, Was Transferred to the Position of Deputy Chief of Staff of the Navy], 澎湃新闻 [Pengpai News], 9 June 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20251017230326/https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2184048. Further background on the Zhoushan Base:

https://web.archive.org/web/20251020173545/https://www.hangzhou.gov.cn/art/2024/8/1/art_1229702039_5910076_3.html, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9554070/>, <https://archive.ph/2tp1K>. It was previously the Zhoushan Naval District (Division Leader grade and possibly Corps deputy leader grade) MUCD 92910 and 91199, which had subordinate frigate *zhidui*.

¹⁰ 蒋子文 [Jiang Ziwen], "海军南海舰队领导班子调整: 向健任纪委书记, 王厚斌任参谋长" [Leadership Changes in the Navy's South Sea Fleet: Xiang Jian Appointed Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary, Wang Houbin Appointed Chief of Staff], 澎湃新闻 [Pengpai News], 28 July 2016, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1505144; partially republished as "海军南海舰队领导班子调整: 王厚斌任参谋长" [Leadership Changes for the Navy's South Sea Fleet: Wang Houbin Appointed Chief of Staff], Sohu, 28 July 2016, <https://news.sohu.com/20160728/n461388766.shtml>; 郎树臣 [Lang Shuchen], "魏宏广王中丙率团到南海舰队慰问: 完善军地协作 支持国防建设" [Wei Hongguang and Wang Zhongbing Led a Delegation to Visit the South Sea Fleet: Improving Military-Civilian Cooperation and Supporting National Defense Construction], 湛江政府网 [Zhanjiang Government Website], 27 July 2016, <https://archive.ph/FTPaS#selection-333.62-333.65>.

¹¹ 周启青, 江晓卫 [Zhou Qiqing and Jiang Xiaowei], "南海卫士如此深情注视, 只为你永远高高飘扬" [The Guardians of the South China Sea Gaze so Tenderly, Only for You to Forever Fly High], 南海舰队 [South China Sea Fleet official WeChat account], 1 August 2017, <https://archive.ph/5sTOv>.

¹² 路玉萍 [Lu Yuping], "建军节送 '大礼' 军港大道建成通车" [Military Port Avenue Opens to Traffic as a "Big Gift" for Army Day], 湛江日报 [Zhanjiang Daily], 2 August 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20251017215138/https://www.gdzjdaily.com.cn/shizheng/p/2733902.html>.

¹³ 岳怀让 [Yue Huairang], "王厚斌跻身海军党委常委, 曾率部参加印度洋海军论坛" [Wang Houbin Has Been Appointed to the Standing Committee of the Naval Party Committee. He Previously Led His Service in Participating in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.], 澎湃新闻 [Pengpai News], 5 January 2019, <https://archive.ph/ehbYX>; <https://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2019-01-05/doc-ihqfscen4323308.shtml>.

missile frigate *Yuncheng* was commended for its work with five ships from Bangladesh, India, and Indonesia in the International Multilateral Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise (IMMSAREX),¹⁴ and received a warm welcome from Bangladesh's Navy during a fleet review hosted by Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid.¹⁵ Wang described the PLAN to reporters as a constructive force in maritime security through conducting Gulf of Aden escort missions and emphasized the importance of participating in multilateral forums.¹⁶

By April 2018, RADM Wang had been transferred to PLAN Headquarters and become a PLAN DCOS.¹⁷ In this capacity, Wang participated in the planning and organization of China's largest-ever naval review in the Southern Theater naval port of Yulin on 12 April 2018, and received Xi's review and instructions there from the naval command post.¹⁸ In the 21 May issue of *People's Navy*, Wang penned a high-profile essay amplifying and explicating the major speech Xi delivered at the review, including Xi's urgent vision for transforming the PLAN into a world-class Navy. Wang stressed that "building a maritime combat system and enhancing military combat readiness is a practical process of constantly identifying problems, resolving contradictions, and improving capabilities. The exposure of shortcomings does not mean that our preparedness has regressed, but rather that as combat readiness continues to advance, our perspective on ourselves, our adversaries, and war has become more discerning." Wang elaborated that "we must also be deeply aware of the contradictions and weaknesses that exist in the development of the Navy, which are hindering the formation and improvement of its combat readiness and fighting capabilities. Without resolving these contradictions, winning future wars will be empty talk. We must have the courage to confront our shortcomings, be adept at pinpointing the root causes, investigate and uncover the underlying causes, prioritize key areas, overcome difficulties, address shortcomings and weaknesses...."¹⁹ In penning these words, Wang could scarcely have foreseen that he himself would ultimately be denounced as an unforgivable weakness requiring removal.

¹⁴ 作者: 吕德胜 吴亢慈 责任编辑: 陈丽娜 [Authors Lü Desheng and Wu Kangci; Editor Chen Lina], "印度洋海军论坛演习结束运城舰启程回国" [The Indian Ocean Naval Forum Exercise Concludes, and the Chinese Navy's Yuncheng Ship Departs for Home], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 1 December 2017, formerly at http://www.mod.gov.cn/action/2017-12/01/content_4798785.htm; now available at <https://www.chinanews.com/mil/2017/12-01/8389954.shtml>.

¹⁵ 作者: 吕德胜 吴亢慈 责任编辑: 杨一楠 [Authors Lü Desheng and Wu Kangci; Editor Yang Yinan], "中国海军首次派舰艇参加印度洋海军论坛多边演习" [The Chinese Navy Sent Ships to Participate in the Indian Ocean Naval Forum's Multilateral Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise for the First Time], 国防部网 [Ministry of National Defense Website], 27 November 2017, http://www.mod.gov.cn/action/2017-11/27/content_4798397.htm.

¹⁶ 吕德胜, 吴亢慈 [Lü Desheng and Wu Kangci], "中国海军舰艇首次参加印度洋海军论坛多边海上搜救演习" [Chinese Naval Vessels Participated in the Indian Ocean Naval Forum's Multilateral Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise for the First Time], 中国军网 [China Military Network], 27 November 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20251017230318/http://www.81.cn/jwzl/2017-11/27/content_7846958.htm.

¹⁷ Yue and Jiang, "Wang Houbin, Chief of Staff of the South China Sea Fleet, Was Transferred to the Position of Deputy Chief of Staff of the Navy."

¹⁸ Christopher H. Sharman and Andrew S. Erickson, "China's Future World-Class Navy: Ends, Ways, Means," in Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch, eds., *The PLA's Long March toward a World-Class Military: Progress, Ambitions, and Obstacles* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, forthcoming 27 October 2025), 196–99, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/the-plas-long-march-toward-a-world-class-military-progress-ambitions-and-obstacles/>.

¹⁹ 海军副参谋长王厚斌 [Navy Deputy Chief of Staff Wang Houbin], "切实强化备战打仗使命担当" [Strengthen Our Mission to Prepare for Combat and Win Battles], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 21 May 2018, 2.

As a PLAN DCOS, on 15 August 2018, Wang attended a PLAN meeting in Beijing to promote a pilot program for standardized base construction of barracks below the corps level, a strategic task approved by Xi and the CMC to promote comprehensive PLA development.²⁰ Wang became a PLAN Deputy Commander (DCDR) in December 2018.²¹ By January 2019 Wang became a member of the PLAN Party Standing Committee (PSC), the dozen-member group that runs the PLAN.²²

On 12 December 2019, while a member of the PLAN PSC, Wang was promoted to VADM (2-star) alongside current PLAN Commander Hu Zhongming and the since-removed PLAN PC Yuan Huazhi (Figure 1, below).²³



Figure 1: PLAN Promotion Ceremony to Vice Admiral and Rear Admiral. The four promoted to VADM included Wang Houbin (first row, fourth from left), current PLAN Commander Hu Zhongming (second row, eighth from left), and the since-removed PLAN PC Yuan Huazhi (first row, third from right). (Beijing News, 12 December 2019)²⁴

²⁰ 孙立波 [Sun Libo], “海军部署军一下部队营区基地化标准化建设试点工作” [The Navy Has Launched a Pilot Project to Standardize the Construction of Bases for its Detachment-Level Military Camps], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 15 August 2018, 1.

²¹ “Vice Admiral Wang Houbin, Deputy Commander, Chinese PLA Navy,” biography from 7th International Maritime Security Conference.

²² Yue, “Wang Houbin Has Been Appointed to the Standing Committee of the Naval Party Committee.”

²³ “军级以上军官军衔晋升政策先行调整 哪些人晋升了军衔?” [Promotion Policies for Officers at the Corps Level and Above Have Been Adjusted in Advance. Who Has Been Promoted?], 新京报 [Beijing News], 12 December 2019, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2019/12/12/661263.html>; “我军驾驶歼 15 着舰第一人戴明盟晋升少将军衔” [Dai Mingmeng, The First Person in Our Military to Land a J-15 on a Carrier, Was Promoted to the Rank of Rear Admiral], 北京日报 [Beijing Daily], 14 December 2019, <https://archive.ph/aYVWk>.

²⁴ “Promotion Policies for Officers at the Corps Level and Above Have Been Adjusted in Advance.”

On 16 May 2020, as a PLAN DCDR, Wang participated in a PLAN medical charity event.²⁵ On 8 July 2020, Wang participated in and addressed a video teleconference in Beijing concerning the implementation of the 13th Five-Year Plan for military facility construction and the resolution of legacy logistics issues.²⁶ On 26 June 2021, he attended the opening of the new PLAN museum in Qingdao.²⁷

On 28 July 2021, VADM Wang, presenting remotely, was the first speaker of the “7th International Maritime Security Conference” held at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.²⁸ Invoking “the important vision to ‘build a maritime community with a shared future’” that Xi promulgated at the PLAN’s 70th anniversary ceremony, Wang read off an cooperative cornucopia of standard talking points (Figure 2, below).²⁹



Figure 2: VADM Wang presented remotely at RSIS’s “7th International Maritime Security Conference.” (RSIS, 28 July 2021)³⁰

²⁵ 林韵诗 [Lin Yunshi], “人事观察 | 2019 年新晋中将王厚斌任海军副司令员” [Personnel Observation | In 2019, The New Vice Admiral Wang Houbin Became the Deputy Commander of the Navy], 财新网 [Caixin.com], 19 May 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20251017225807/https://china.caixin.com/2020-05-19/101555972.html>.

²⁶ 何洲汀, 李帅 [He Zhouding and Li Shuai], “海军召开专题电视电话会议强调: 聚力推进军事设施建设和历史遗留问题整改” [Navy Holds Special Video Teleconference to Emphasize Focused Efforts on Military Facility Construction and Rectification of Historical Legacy Issues], [People’s Navy], 10 July 2020, 1.

²⁷ 王庆厚, 陈浩天, 张付华 [Wang Qinghou, Chen Haotian, and Zhang Fuhua], “打造海军的历史高地精神高地文化高地: 中国人民解放军海军博物馆开馆仪式活动举” [Building the Navy’s Historical, Spiritual and Cultural Heights: The Opening Ceremony of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy Museum Was Held], 当代海军 [Navy Today] 7 (July 2021): i, 1.

²⁸ “Vice Admiral Wang Houbin, Deputy Commander, Chinese PLA Navy,” biography from 7th International Maritime Security Conference.

²⁹ VADM Wang Houbin, “Champion the Vision of a Maritime Community with a Shared Future and Work Together to Preserve Maritime Peace and Stability,” in “Session 1: Preserving Peace and Stability in the Post-Pandemic Maritime Commons,” International Maritime Security Conference, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 28 July 2021, minutes 4:35-24:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1eB4y6kbDo>.

³⁰ Ibid.

On 13 September 2021, Wang and fellow PLAN PSC members attended theoretical training in Beijing for Party Committee Secretaries of Navy Units at or above the corps level.³¹ On 15 June 2022, Wang participated in the 13th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party Navy as a member of its Presidium and an executive chairman of the meeting.³² Previously a member of the 12th PLAN PSC, he was elected to the 13th PLAN PSC, and attended its first plenary session in Beijing that afternoon.³³ The methodical blocks of Wang’s career were stacking up high.

Just as Wang approached his chance to reach his apogee within the PLAN hierarchy, he experienced a stunning career shift. On 31 July 2023, in the PLA’s most dramatic instance to date of a cross-service transfer, Wang was appointed PLARF Commander, a Theater Command Leader-grade position, and promoted to full General (3-star) (**Figure 3**, below).³⁴ Notably, General He Weidong presided over the promotion ceremony and General Li Shangfu and Admiral Miao Hua both attended; all three CMC Members were later removed.³⁵ Similarly promoted at the ceremony was General Xu Xisheng, PLARF Political Commissar. As part of a dramatic effort to refresh PLARF leadership, General Xu, previously a career Air Force officer

³¹ 李远 记者 牛涛 [Li Yuan, reporter Niu Tao], “海军军以上单位党委书记理论集训在京结束: 把学习关彻习主席“七一”重要演讲精神引向深入, 强力推进集训果转化为海军建设发展实际成效” [Theoretical training for Party Committee Secretaries of Navy units at the corps level and above concluded in Beijing: The focus was on deepening the study of the spirit of President Xi’s important speech on July 1st. The results of the training were vigorously translated into concrete achievements in the development of the Navy.], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 13 September 2021, 1.

³² 海郑祖 记者牛涛 王汉 [Hai Zhengzu, reporters Niu Tao and Wang Han], “紧密团结在以习近平总书记为核心的党中央周围努力把人民海军全面建成世界一流海军; 申国共产制星篇十三次代献会胜利睡; 选举产生海军第十三届党的委员会、新一届海军党的纪律检查委员会和海军出席党的二十大代表通过《海军第十三次党代表大会关于海军第十二届党的委员会报告的决议刚海军第十三次党代表大会关于海军党的纪律检查委员会工作报告的决议》; 袁华智同志主持大会选举, 董军同志主持闭幕会并致闭幕词” [Closely uniting around the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core, we strive to comprehensively build the People’s Navy into a world-class navy. The 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was successfully held. The 13th Party Committee of the Navy, the new Navy Party Discipline Inspection Commission, and Navy delegates to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China were elected. The “Resolution of the 13th Party Congress of the Navy on the Report of the 12th Party Committee of the Navy” and the “Resolution of the 13th Party Congress of the Navy on the Work Report of the Navy Party Discipline Inspection Commission” were adopted. Comrade Yuan Huazhi presided over the meeting and elected Comrade Dong Jun. Comrade Dong Jun presided over the closing session and delivered the closing remarks.], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 16 June 2022, 1.

³³ 海郑祖 记者牛涛 王汉唐 [Hai Zhengzu, reporters Niu Tao and Wang Hantang], “富军党委十三届一次全会在京百开: 选举海军党委常委和书记、副书记通过海军纪委书记、副书记袁华智同志主持会议董军同志出席” [The 13th Plenary Session of the Navy Party Committee was held in Beijing: The election of members of the Standing Committee of the Navy Party Committee and the Secretary and Deputy Secretary was passed. Comrade Yuan Huazhi, Secretary and Deputy Secretary of the Navy Discipline Inspection Commission, presided over the meeting and Comrade Dong Jun attended.], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 16 June 2022, 1.

³⁴ 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 Held a Ceremony for Promotion to the Rank of General. Xi Jinping Issued an Order and Congratulated the Officers Who Were Promoted to the Rank.], 新华社 [Xinhua], 31 July 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20230801033121/http://www.news.cn/2023-07/31/c_1129778572.htm.

³⁵ “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 Held a Promotion Ceremony to the Rank of General. Xi Jinping Presented the Order and Congratulated the Promoted Officers.], 新华网 [Xinhua Net], 31 July 2023, http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2023-07/31/c_1129778572.htm.

who, like Wang, lacked PLARF experience replaced the just-removed PLARF Political Commissar General Xu Zhongbo.³⁶ To CMSI's knowledge, such simultaneous replacement of an existing PLA service's two top positions—with both posts swapped out on the same day—is unprecedented.



Figure 3: Promotion Ceremony for PLARF Commander Wang Houbin and Political Commissar Xu Xisheng (left and right, respectively, on riser in back row) to Full General at Central Military Commission, Bayi Building, Beijing. Front row, left to right, CMC Members: General Zhang Shengmin, Secretary, CMC Discipline Inspection Commission; General Liu Zhenli, Chief, Joint Staff Department; General He Weidong, 2nd CMC Vice Chair (removed); Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping; General Zhang Youxia, 1st CMC Vice Chair; General Li Shangfu, State Councilor/Defense Minister CMC member (removed); Admiral Miao Hua, Director, Political Work Department (removed). (Xinhua, 31 July 2023)³⁷

³⁶ Brad Lendon, Simone McCarthy, and Wayne Chang, “China Replaces Elite Nuclear Leadership in Surprise Military Shake-Up,” CNN, 2 August 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/02/china/china-pla-rocket-force-shakeup-new-leaders-intl-hnk-ml-mic/index.html>.

³⁷ “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 Held a Promotion Ceremony to the Rank of General. Xi Jinping Presented the Order and Congratulated the Promoted Officers.], 新华网 [Xinhua Net], 31 July 2023, http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2023-07/31/c_1129778572.htm.

Wang's selection for this highly unusual transfer seems to stem from a combination of Xi's need for outsiders to oversee the then-corrupted PLARF and Wang's sufficient amount of prior joint, nuclear-relevant, and staff experience relative to his cohort peers. As a naval aviator with experience working in GSD, Wang had joint exposure. With his two SSF positions and his experience as PLAN DCOS and DCDR, perhaps Wang had enough oversight of SSBNs and related nuclear issues to afford him at least some background facilitating his future PLARF assignment.

On 19 June 2024, as PLARF Commander, General Wang attended the CMC Work Meeting in Yan'an, at which Xi delivered a major speech (Figure 4, below).³⁸



Figure 4: PLARF Commander General Wang Houbin (front row, far left) at CMC Work Meeting in Yan'an. To the immediate right are since-removed PLAN PC Admiral Yuan Huazhi and PLAN Commander Admiral Hu Zhongming. (CCTV Xinwen Lianbo, 19 June 2024)³⁹

In October 2024, Wang was present when Xi inspected the PLARF's 611th Launch Brigade in Chizhou (in Wang's home province, Anhui).⁴⁰

³⁸ “中央军委政治工作会议在延安召开 习近平出席会议并发表重要讲话强调 贯彻落实新时代政治建军方略 为强军事业提供坚强政治保证” [The Central Military Commission Held a Political Work Conference in Yan'an. Xi Jinping Attended the Meeting and Delivered an Important Speech, Emphasizing the Implementation of the Strategy of Political Military Construction in the New Era to Provide a Strong Political Guarantee for the Cause of Strengthening the Military.], 「新闻联播」 [News Broadcast], CCTV, 19 June 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idPhZCjttPU>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “习近平在视察火箭军某旅时强调 坚持政治引领 强化使命担当 埋头苦干实干 提升战略导弹部队威慑和实战能力” [During His Inspection of a Brigade of the Rocket Force, Xi Jinping Emphasized the Importance of

Following reportedly extensive procurement-related corruption during a rapid, massive PLARF buildout, the service was purged severely and continuously from July 2023 to August 2024.⁴¹ At least eight generals were removed, including former Commanders Generals Wei Fenghe and Zhou Yaning, and then-Commander Li Yuchao—the last of which Wang replaced;⁴² former Deputy Commanders Lieutenant Generals Zhang Zhenzhong and Li Chuanguang;⁴³ former Chief of Staff Sun Jinming; former Equipment Department Director Lü Hong; and post-1970s Major General Li Tongjian.⁴⁴ On a likely related note, Li Shangfu was removed in October 2023; before becoming PRC Minister of National Defense, Li had led the CMC’s Equipment Development Department (EDD) (2017–22), where he approved PLA weapons acquisitions.⁴⁵

Ironically, Wang himself appears to have been purged after at least some PLARF problems were finally being rectified. “The wholesale dismissal of senior PLARF leadership may be connected to fraud cases involving the construction of underground silos for ballistic missiles during a period of rapid expansion for the PLARF and the PRC’s missile industry,” the Pentagon judged in December 2024. “This investigation likely resulted in the PLARF repairing the silos, which

Adhering to Political Guidance, Strengthening Mission Responsibility, And Working Diligently to Enhance the Deterrence and Combat Capabilities of the Strategic Missile Force], 新闻联播 | [News Broadcast], CCTV, 19 October 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLdvalqYzDU>.

⁴¹ Elliot Ji, “Rocket-Powered Corruption: Why the Missile Industry Became the Target of Xi’s Purge,” *War on the Rocks*, 23 January 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/01/rocket-powered-corruption-why-the-missile-industry-became-the-target-of-xis-purge/>.

⁴² Minnie Chan, “China Names General Wang Houbin as New PLA Rocket Force Chief after Former Commanders Snared in Corruption Scandal,” *South China Morning Post*, 31 July 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3229515/china-unveils-new-pla-rocket-force-leadership-after-former-commanders-snared-corruption-scandal>.

⁴³ Another former Deputy Commander, Lieutenant General Wu Guohua, died in 2023 “under mysterious circumstances.” James Char, “Commentary: What’s Going On with China’s Surprise Military Shake-up?” *CNA*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/china-military-pla-rocket-force-nuclear-service-leadership-shakeup-3761851>.

⁴⁴ For Sun Jinming, see: “授权发布 | 中国共产党第二十届中央委员会第三次全体会议公报” [Authorized Release: Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China], 新华网 [Xinhua News], 18 July 2024,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20240805151707/http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/20240718/a41ada3016874e358d5064bba05eba98/c.html>. For Lü Hong, see: “全国人民代表大会常务委员会公告（十四届）第二号”

[Announcement of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (14th Session) No. 2], 新华网 [Xinhua News], 29 December 2023,

https://web.archive.org/web/20231229234429/http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c2/kgfb/202312/t20231229_433992.html.

For Li Tongjian, see: “北京市第十六届人民代表大会常务委员会代表资格审查委员会关于北京市第十六届人民代表大会个别代表的代表资格的报告” [Report of the Qualification Review Committee of the Standing Committee of the 16th Beijing Municipal People’s Congress on the Qualifications of Individual Deputies to the 16th Beijing Municipal People’s Congress], 北京市人民代表大会 [Standing Committee of Beijing Municipal People’s Congress], 24 November 2023,

https://web.archive.org/web/20250304050946/http://www.bjrd.gov.cn/rdzt/rdcwhgb/ssljrdcwhgb202306/202403/t20240319_3593926.html.

⁴⁵ *Office of the Secretary of Defense, 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>.

would have increased the overall operational readiness of its silo-based force.”⁴⁶ But perhaps Xi’s effort to clean house had not fully succeeded.

Wang’s Removal: Why Now and For What Reason?

The official reason for General Wang Houbin’s removal as PLARF Commander is his alleged “serious official crimes involving exceptionally large sums of money.”⁴⁷ Financial impropriety, of course, has long been a convenient instrument for Beijing to explain the downfall of senior military officers. Former Logistics Department Deputy Head Gu Junshan, for instance, was charged with embezzlement, bribery, misuse of state funds, and abuse of power—reportedly pocketing nearly one hundred million dollars.⁴⁸ The roster of generals and admirals cashiered for similar “disciplinary” reasons continues to expand.

Yet graft is widespread, and rarely tells the whole story itself. Corruption—whether in the form of promotion-related pay-to-play schemes, kickbacks, or the monetization of state resources—is a long-standing feature of the PRC system, not a malfunction within it. There are at least three alternative explanations for Wang’s abrupt fall: his ties to Admiral Miao Hua, inter-service factionalism within the PLA, and deep-seated capability or integrity issues inside the PLARF itself.

The most compelling explanation is Wang’s association with Admiral Miao Hua—and by extension with the two other just-removed officials with greatest responsibility for managing personnel affairs, particularly evaluating and promoting flag and general officers. Admiral Miao Hua, General He Weidong, and General He Hongjun have just been condemned as a toxic triumvirate: He Weidong oversaw PLA personnel affairs as second CMC vice chairman, while He Hongjun was Miao’s Deputy in the CMC’s Political Work Department, where they oversaw PLA-wide promotions. “The removal of the nine generals [and admirals] is the most prominent case to date linked to the PLA’s broader personnel management problems,” K. Tristan Tang argues cogently. “The nine appear to have formed an improper network centered around Miao Hua and He Weidong.”⁴⁹

As the member of the recently-removed nine to have advanced fastest and furthest, Miao is also at the center of what may be another overlapping cause for removal: formative career advancement by many of the just-removed nine within the Eastern Theater Command, where Wang once served as ESF DCOS and Deputy Commander, Zhoushan Base. Together with foundational experiences of Miao and He Weidong in the old 31st Group Army in Fujian province (restructured and reflagged as the 73rd Group Army under the Eastern Theater Command as part of Xi’s reforms in 2017), this suggests that a “Fujian Clique” is being

⁴⁶ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁷ “Nine, Including He Weidong and Miao Hua, Have Been Expelled from the Party and Military for Serious Violations of Discipline and Law,” MND; Wong, “Xi Removes China’s No. 2 General in Escalating Purge of Military Leadership.”

⁴⁸ “PLA General Alleged Bribes Totaled \$98 million,” *China Daily*, 9 December 2014, <https://en.people.cn/n/2014/1209/c90785-8820154.html>.

⁴⁹ K. Tristan Tang, “Cronyism and Failed Promotions: Xi’s PLA Purge,” *Jamestown China Brief* (17 October 2025), <https://jamestown.org/program/cronyism-and-failed-promotions-xis-pla-purge/>.

purged.⁵⁰ While such motives are difficult to verify given bureaucratic and decision-making opacity, they are not inherently the stuff of conspiracy theories. In a low-trust system lacking institutional checks and balances with the Party inherently above the law, elite power struggles are endemic and personal associations based on shared background and experience are part of widespread survival and advancement strategies among key stakeholders.

Miao was suspended from his positions as a CMC member and Director of the CMC Political Work Department in November 2024 for “serious violations of discipline,” according to Defense Ministry Spokesperson Senior Colonel Wu Qian.⁵¹ Miao oversaw all senior PLA promotions, giving him vast patronage power. He attended Wang’s elevation to full General on 31 July 2023—an event presided over by former second CMC Vice Chair He Weidong, who was expelled from both the Party and the military in the same announcement that named Wang.⁵²

The connection between Wang and Miao runs deep. As PLAN PC (2015–17), Miao would have worked closely with Wang, then DCOS and a member of the PLAN Party Standing Committee.⁵³ There are rumors that they developed a “special relationship” during this time.⁵⁴ Their portfolios overlapped extensively; both were fixtures at the same senior meetings and jointly managed complex operational and political issues. Miao likely approved Wang’s 2017 deployment to the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and later, as head of the CMC Political Work Department, would have signed off on Wang’s 2019 promotion to Vice Admiral. Their professional relationship, once an asset, may have become the very pretext for Wang’s undoing. Even if Wang achieved a sterling record as PLARF Commander, his prior dealings with Miao may have finally caught up with him.

A second—and more speculative—interpretation sees Wang as collateral damage in a struggle between Navy and Army factions. Despite donning the PLARF’s uniform as the service’s Commander,⁵⁵ Wang’s roots were unmistakably maritime. His appointment placed a Navy insider at the helm of a service historically dominated by Army officers—a move certain to stir resentment.

This tension unfolded against a strategic pivot that elevated the maritime domain over China’s traditional land-centric posture. Beijing’s 2015 Defense White Paper explicitly declared that “the

⁵⁰ Brandon Tran and Gerui Zhang, “PLA Factions and the Erosion of Xi’s Power Over the Military,” *Jamestown China Brief* 25.5 (15 March 2025), <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-factions-and-the-erosion-of-xis-power-over-the-military/>.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² “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 Held a Promotion Ceremony to the Rank of General. Xi Jinping Presented the Order and Congratulated the Promoted Officers.], *新华网* [Xinhua Net], 31 July 2023, http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2023-07/31/c_1129778572.htm.

⁵³ Erickson and Sharman, “Admiral Miao Hua’s Fall.”

⁵⁴ X post by @cskun1989 1:52 AM, 29 November 2024, <https://x.com/cskun1989/status/1862389089145954656>.

⁵⁵ While it may be difficult to discern in some images and videos, the PLARF uniform is different from the PLAA uniform: the coat and trousers are a darker shade of green. PLARF service uniform shirts are tan, not green like those of the PLAA.

traditional view that the land outweighs the sea must be abandoned.”⁵⁶ Such a shift, championed by Xi himself, signaled a redistribution of influence and resources within the PLA. It is plausible that senior Army leaders—possibly including the extremely, increasingly powerful CMC first Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia—saw this maritime prioritization as a direct threat. A wave of purges targeting senior Navy officers seems to support this theory: Admiral Miao Hua, Vice Admirals Li Pengcheng and Ju Xinchun (both former Southern Theater Navy commanders), Admiral Yuan Huazhi (former PLAN Political Commissar), and Vice Admiral Li Hanjun (former PLAN COS) have all been removed in recent years.⁵⁷ The pattern suggests a deliberate effort to weaken the Navy’s institutional power—a service community that, for now, appears to be losing bureaucratic clout together with prominent flags even as it retains advantageous funding and force structure trends under the committed navalist Xi.⁵⁸

A third explanation points inward, to the PLARF itself. Since its creation in 2015 from the former Second Artillery Corps, the Rocket Forces have cycled through four commanders—Wei Fenghe, Zhou Yaning, Li Yuchao, and now Wang Houbin—each felled by corruption allegations.⁵⁹ The pattern extends down the ranks: PC Xu Zhongbo and his deputies Liu Guangbin and Zhang Zhenzhong were dismissed in June 2023, and later that year the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference stripped aerospace-defense executives Wu Yansheng, Liu Shiquan, and Wang Changqing of their political titles.⁶⁰ Whether these removals reflect genuine corruption or are a convenient cover for deeper dysfunction or perceived disloyalty, they expose a service plagued by instability.

⁵⁶ *China’s Military Strategy* (Beijing: PRC State Council Information Office, May 2015),

https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm.

⁵⁷ Erickson and Sharman, “Admiral Miao Hua’s Fall”; Christopher H. Sharman and Andrew S. Erickson, *Dirty But Preparing to Fight: VADM Li Pengcheng’s Downfall Amid Increasing PLAN Readiness*, *China Maritime Report* 44 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 24 January 2025), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/44/>; Erickson, “Confirmed: ADM Yuan Huazhi Removed as the PLAN’s Political Commissar”; Andrew S. Erickson and Christopher H. Sharman, “PLAN Chief of Staff VADM Li Hanjun: Fast-Rising Star of Training and Education Extinguished,” *CMSI Note* 15 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 30 June 2025), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/15/>.

⁵⁸ Andrew S. Erickson, *The People of China’s Navy and Other Maritime Forces: Extended Summary of Conference Findings*, *China Maritime Report* 47 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 28 May 2025), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/47/>.

⁵⁹ For Wei Fenghe, see: “中央军委原委员、原国务委员兼国防部长魏凤和受到开除党籍处分” [Wei Fenghe, Former Member of the Central Military Commission, Former State Councilor and Minister of National Defense, Was Expelled from the Party], 新华网 [Xinhua News], 27 June 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240914104209/http://www.news.cn/politics/20240627/05994521863f4f89979be5f99e445845/c.html>. For Zhou Yaning and Li Yuchao, see: 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], 2024年, 第一号 (总号: 368) [No. 1, 2024; No. 368 in series], 15 January 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240202103452/http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzlhgbc/27214/gb2024/202402/P020240202330064224451.pdf>. For Wang Houbin, see: “Nine, Including He Weidong and Miao Hua, Have Been Expelled from the Party and Military for Serious Violations of Discipline and Law,” MND.

⁶⁰ See Joyce Huang, “Analysts Say Shakeup at China’s Rocket Force Suggests Strategy Shift Toward ‘Nuclear Triad,’” *Voice of America (VOA) News*, 2 August 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/analysts-say-shakeup-at-china-s-rocket-force-suggests-strategy-shift-toward-nuclear-triad-/7208792.html>; Phoebe Zhang, “Beijing Strips 3 Aerospace-Defence Executives of Political Titles as China Cracks Down on Corruption in Crucial Sector,” *South China Morning Post*, 28 December 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3246482/beijing-strips-3-aerospace-defence-executives-political-titles-china-cracks-down-corruption-crucial>.

Still, the PLARF—like the PLAN and other PLA services—appears to have retained operational effectiveness despite this churn. Recent missile exercises around Taiwan show little evidence of degraded readiness—a reminder that even amid purges and political bloodletting, the PLA’s strategic mission continues uninterrupted.

Tentative Takeaways

General Wang Houbin has had one of the most extreme and unusual career trajectories in recent PLA(N) history. What does it suggest about the PLA(N) under Xi? The removal of Wang and eight other leading officers raises important related questions. Are further major purges underway, as is rumored? Does this official process at the top now open up the possibility of long-delayed activities, such as three-star promotions for the first time this calendar year? Might VADM Leng gain a third star and switching from Acting PLAN PC to fully in the role? Are there implications for elite power struggles?

Despite the continuing removals of high-ranking officers, based on continued new weapons systems deployments and observable training and exercises, CMSI has not observed any undermining of PLA capabilities development or operational readiness. Personnel churn may well have imposed internal burdens and “taxes,” but these may be more than offset by exceptional PRC strengths in prioritization and resource mobilization. In any case, whatever negative impacts occurred may already have been absorbed and accounted for, as many of nine officers whose removal was just announced have not been seen for many months, yet the PLA(N) was still able to discharge its duties with apparent effectiveness. Like Wang Houbin, the eight other officers did not have frontline operational responsibilities. Notably, the PLAN has insulated its frontline operational units—the heart of its combat power—from the corrosive effects of corruption. In Ryan Martinson’s analysis, “that system is clearly working. PLAN operational forces are making tremendous advances, and they are doing so by relying on the competence of officers forged in an organization that punishes corruption and values competence—and rewards it with honor and responsibility.”⁶¹ While much research remains to be done, there is no evidentiary basis for dismissing PLA(N) capabilities or the dramatic trajectory on which they continue to improve. As the PLA editorial regarding the nine officers’ dismissal concludes, “A thousand ships pass by the sunken boat....”⁶²

⁶¹ Ryan D. Martinson, *The PLAN Corruption Paradox: Insights from the 1st Destroyer Flotilla, China Maritime Report* 49 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 13 August 2025), 14, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/49/>.

⁶² Original Chinese: “沉舟侧畔千帆过...” 责任编辑: 乌铭琪 [Editor: Wu Mingqi], “解放军报社论: 坚定不移把军队反腐败斗争进行到底” [People’s Liberation Army Daily Editorial: Unwaveringly Carry the Military Anti-Corruption Campaign Through to the End], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 18 October 2025, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16416154.html>.