

Disappearances and departures: What's happening in China's PLA?

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Corruption has been the bane of most developing societies and China's case is no different. As per estimates, bribery, kickbacks, theft and waste of public funds cost China at least three percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) and have implications for the country's economic and political security.

Cadre corruption in China has received significant media attention since Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary Xi Jinping announced his controversial anti-corruption campaign in 2012. Since then, several high-ranking military and government officials have been found guilty of corruption.

The question of corruption in China came to the fore once again recently this month, as China's new foreign minister Qin Gang has disappeared abruptly from public view, giving rise to speculations that he has fallen foul of the leadership. Rumours of an affair with a well-known television presenter are doing the rounds as well. It is also being speculated that he has been under the weather. However, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin has stated that he has not heard about any such reports.

While Qin's disappearance is being more widely discussed, there are a few other disappearances and departures that have taken place among Chinese officials lately. Wu Guoua, the deputy commander of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force reportedly died by suicide on June 6, 2023 — the same day when Xi was conducting an inspection of the Eastern Theatre Command.

However, the odd bit is that the PLA has stated that the cause of Wu's sudden death was cerebral haemorrhage. This incident marked just one of the recent unfortunate occurrences within the PLA Rocket Force. Li Yuchao, commander of the rocket force, was taken away for an investigation on June 27.

Former Lt. Col. Yao Cheng of the CCP Naval Command had posted on Twitter on June 28 about Li being taken away from his office on the morning of June 27. Yao had added that Li's son studies in the United States, raising concerns about the potential betrayal of CCP's military intelligence. On June 28, Xi Jinping presented the 'certificates of order' to promote two military officers to the rank of general, clearly implying that the vacuum created had to be filled in, and that some of the disappearances of officials were to remain as disappearances.

Another shocking investigation has been that of former defence minister Wei Fenghe who had squarely placed the blame for the conflict at Galwan on India. There is a link between Li and Wei, since Wei had been instrumental in getting Li on board the services. In

addition to Li and Wei, former deputy commander of the rocket force Zhang Zhenhong is under investigation.

The list does not end as Liu Guangbin, deputy commander of the rocket force and Shang Hong, the deputy commander of the Strategic Support force and commander of the space force, are also facing investigations.

Shang's qualification as a representative to the National People's Congress was revoked in 2022, and he has not appeared in public since then. Numerous such investigations of defence officials are bound to shake up the morale of any army and indicate difficulties for the highest echelons of governance.

Speculations around corruption remain high given the spate of disappearances and departures from the public eye. However, beneath the cover of corruption and investigations lie issues of disloyalty to Xi Jinping. In 2018, Xi had called for "absolute loyalty" from the military in a speech to the PLA and had stated that strengthening the party's leadership in the army is necessary for making China and its army powerful.

In 2021, Xi had called on young officials to firm up their ideals and to stay loyal to the party. In 2023, during his visit to the Eastern Command, Xi stated the need for the PLA to strengthen. The question that arises is about the need to reiterate loyalty from cadres and from the PLA continuously. The spate of disappearances and departures clearly indicates there's trouble brewing within the party and the military.

While a Wagner Group-style rebellion is not possible in China for the simple reason that Chinese security companies handle only non-lethal guard duties, problems around disloyalty or not following Xi's command in letter and spirit are clearly beginning to show in China.

The developments are worthy to be watched out for, especially from India, because Xi in January 2023 had addressed PLA troops along the India-China border and had hailed the soldiers as models of border defence, and even encouraged them to persist in their efforts and to make new contributions. How all of this plays out given the sudden spike in investigations and disappearances needs to be watched out for.

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