

## The curious case of disappearing generals

by GWYNNE DYER

Armies can be used against both foreigners abroad and citizens at home, but the two roles require quite different equipment and tactics. The same applies to their commanders: you need a different kind of general if you think that the primary task of their troops will be controlling dissent at home.

With that in mind, what has been happening in China is quite interesting. Slowly at first, but now in a rush, the senior command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been purged of its highest-ranking generals.

It's not like Stalin's great purge of Soviet generals in 1937-38, just before the Second World War, when at least 780 generals were shot. The Chinese generals are not being executed, although many are ending up in jail. Nobody outside the intelligence services knows what is happening to lower-ranking generals, but at the highest level, it is almost a clean sweep.

China's highest military body, the Central Military Commission (CMC), normally has seven members, with President Xi Jinping himself in the chair in his parallel role as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. (It is the Party, not the State, that controls the armed forces.)

These six men should be loyal to Xi because he appointed each of them after the 20th Party Congress four years ago. Yet last week, all six were dismissed on suspicion of corruption, including the CMC's vice-chair, Zhang Youxia, one of Xi's oldest friends.

Xi and Zhang were childhood friends whose fathers had served together under Mao in the Liberation War, and they regarded each other as Honorary Brothers. Moreover, Zhang was the last serving PLA officer to have seen actual combat (in border clashes with Vietnam in 1979 and 1984).

Now they have all been accused of 'serious violations of discipline and law' (the standard phrase for corruption) and removed from the CMC. Why?

The accusation of corruption is probably true for some of them, as it is for many or most PLA officers, but that would have been true already when they were appointed to the jobs. Something else must have changed.

In most dictatorships, the first suspects are those who control the troops and might try to stage a military coup. However, that really seems unlikely in a country where the Communist Party has been in power for 77 years, and almost every military officer is also a Party member.

It's not that the Party can never be overthrown. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Russia) was removed from power by a nonviolent popular revolt after 74 years in 1991, so you could speculate that China is in the same situation now. But that's probably much too simplistic: history may rhyme, but it rarely repeats quite that accurately.

However, this is precisely the historical analogy lurking at the bottom of the psyche of most true-believing Communists (a rare breed) whom I have known in China. This rarely admitted spectre even drives a good deal of state policy in China - including, perhaps, this stunning reshuffle.

We know that the Chinese economy is in big long-term trouble and that many young people are disaffected with the state ('lie flat?'). Maybe China's rulers know more than we do about growing dissent, or maybe they are just imagining it - but if domestic repression is going to be necessary, then they need different people on the CMC.

It's only a hypothesis, but it is one possible explanation for why the real military people have been removed from the existing CMC.

The Chinese Communist Party could do as thorough a job of suppressing dissent in the streets as Iran's Revolutionary Guard, no doubt, but it would probably require a change in China's current military leadership.

Speaking of which, have you noticed how many senior American generals have been removed from office in the past year? President Trump has fired or otherwise relieved at least 15 very senior officers, most of them 3-stars and 4-stars and replaced them with men (all men) he considers more aligned with his values.

This happens a little bit in most administrations, but never on the scale seen in the last year. Moreover, Trump has said that in future he will personally interview all prospective four-star nominees in every service.

It doesn't necessarily mean he's putting in the right people in case he needs to use the army to suppress large-scale domestic dissent at home in future, but an unfriendly observer could certainly construe it that way. There are definitely people around him who think that far ahead, although at this stage it would be just one contingency among many in their forward planning.