



# THE GORDON CHANG REPORT

PRESENTED BY THE  
PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

VOLUME 2, NO. 1

## In China's 'Intriguing Period,' Xi Jinping Could Be Deposed

by Gordon G. Chang | July 2025

Xi Jinping, often called China's "all-powerful" leader, has recently lost substantial influence over the Chinese regime.

Some analysts even believe that in the next few months Xi will be formally removed from his three positions: Communist Party general secretary, chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission, and president of the Chinese state. Others predict he will be kept on only as a figurehead.

This moment of infighting in the CCP, the Party, could be as consequential as another time of regime turmoil, the run-up in the mid-1960s to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which almost ended Party rule. In any event, as veteran China watcher Willy Wo-Lap Lam wrote in June, this is "an intriguing period."<sup>1</sup>

There are, for instance, intriguing signs that Xi has lost control of the most powerful faction in the Party, the People's Liberation Army.

Among other things, Xi's most senior loyalist in uniform has disappeared from public view.<sup>2</sup> Gen. He Weidong, a vice chairman of the Central Military Commission and the No. 2-ranked uniformed officer, was last seen in public on March 11, at the end of the regime's major political event of the year, the so-called Two Sessions.

Many believe that Xi sacked Gen. He, who was known as Xi's hatchet man. It's true that Xi, since being named general secretary in November 2012, has both purged military officers—ostensibly for "corruption"—and restructured the PLA. Both moves resulted in his taking firm control of the military.

Therefore, people have naturally assumed that Xi, for some reason, turned on his most important supporter in the military. That conclusion, however, appears wrong: It is much more probable that Xi's adversaries removed Gen. He.

While Xi loyalists were being removed from public view, *PLA Daily*, the Chinese military's main propaganda organ, ran a series of articles praising "collective leadership," a direct and public rejection of Xi's continual calls for unity, centralization of control, and complete obedience to his rule.

These articles began appearing July 9 of last year and were written by those aligned with the No. 1-ranked uniformed officer, Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Gen. Zhang Youxia. These articles could not have appeared if Xi were in complete control of the military.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Gen He's disappearance was followed by the disappearance of another Xi loyalist, Gen. He Hongjun. There are rumors that both generals were suicided in May at the military's 301 Hospital in Beijing.<sup>4</sup> Yet whether the two generals remain alive, they are clearly out of the way. Their disappearance, therefore, weakens Xi.

"Gen. He Weidong was instrumental in Xi's purges in the military, so his disappearance indicates opposition to Xi's rule," Charles Burton of the Sinopsis think tank noted in comments to me in June.<sup>5</sup>

The recent disappearances follow the sackings of, among others, Gen. Li Shangfu, a defense minister; Gen. Wei Fenghe, one of Li's predecessors;

and perhaps as many as 70 in the Rocket Force, the branch responsible for the country's nuclear weapons. Lam, the China watcher, also points to the removals of two other Xi supporters, Gen. Miao Hua, head of personnel and ideological inspection, and Gen. Lin Xiangyang, commander of the all-important Eastern Theater Command.<sup>6</sup>

In short, there is substantial corroboration for the rumors of Xi's loss of control of the military. Gen. Zhang Youxia looks to be in charge. Some even believe Zhang is now the most powerful figure in China.

"The military, bruised by Xi Jinping's 'Emperor for Life' purges, has had enough," Blaine Holt, a retired U.S. Air Force general and now a close observer of the Chinese military, wrote to me in late June. "Counter-purges originating from the top general, Zhang Youxia, have succeeded in isolating Xi."<sup>7</sup>

There are similar rumors suggesting Xi now exercises far less power in the Party's civilian circles. "Analysis of Chinese Communist Party propaganda over the past two months suggests a significant reduction of Xi Jinping's public leadership role," Burton, also a former Canadian diplomat stationed in Beijing, told me in late June. "Following a near-total disappearance from public view in May, Mr. Xi's subsequent appearances have been largely ceremonial or in archival footage. Once, state media showed Xi all the time, but now Xi has clearly been demoted in the coverage."<sup>8</sup>

Burton points to the portrayal in official media of Xi's meetings with President Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus, the state-recognized Panchen Lama, and

**There is substantial corroboration for the rumors of Xi's loss of control of the Chinese military.**

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon. “All these appearances have lacked substantive policy focus,” he observed.<sup>9</sup>

“Crucially, the customary nightly news footage of Xi directing Politburo meetings, with Standing Committee members taking extensive notes, has been absent,” Burton pointed out. “Instead, Premier Li Qiang and Political Consultative Conference Chair Wang Huning are now shown chairing policy meetings.”<sup>10</sup>

Burton points to a particularly humiliating June 13 appearance for Xi at a symposium marking the 120th anniversary of the birth of Chen Yun, a leading Party figure who died in 1995. “In his speech, Xi was compelled to praise ‘collective leadership’ and Chen, who advocated a prudent style of governance quite different from Xi’s,” Burton states. “The state media broadcast ended without showing any applause for Xi.”<sup>11</sup>

Burton noted that the last significant coverage of Xi in state media occurred around April 25.<sup>12</sup> “Yes, state media reported that Xi chaired a Politburo study session on the ‘eight-point rules’ aimed at instilling discipline on Party members,” the Synopsis scholar told me. “This, however, was a pro forma event timed to coincide with the Communist Party’s anniversary celebrations. The publicity was as low-key as it could have been and by no means suggests that Xi has restored his one-man dominance over the regime.”<sup>13</sup>

So what will happen to China’s leader?

Willy Lam believes the “relative absence of supreme leader Xi Jinping in authoritative media” suggests his power “is waning.” Yet Lam, one of the world’s most followed China watchers, believes Xi is “still unassailable.”<sup>14</sup>

“Supreme leader Xi Jinping is in no danger of losing his top spot as the ‘core’ of the leadership before the CCP’s 21st National Congress in late 2027,” writes Lam. “According to the CCP charter, a general secretary can only be removed by either a Central Committee plenum or a full-fledged Party Congress. Most members of the CCP Central Committee confirmed at the 20th Party Congress in 2022 are Xi loyalists, so it is unlikely they will want to abandon Xi at the forthcoming Fourth Plenum (rumored to be scheduled for the autumn), or in subsequent plenary sessions.”<sup>15</sup>

Xi has kept obvious successors from emerging, and, if Lam is correct, that shrewd tactic is now working. There is, Lam pointed out, a “lack of obvious challengers to Xi Jinping—figures apparently favored by the party elders, the military, and the ‘red second generation’ are either deemed not heavyweight enough or are not interested in the job.”<sup>16</sup>

Others, however, believe a leadership change will occur soon. Gregory Copley, the president of the International Strategic Studies Association and editor-in-chief of *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, told me the change in leadership could take place as early as August.<sup>17</sup> “The CCP and Xi have apparently agreed on the departure from all offices of Xi Jinping,” he wrote to me. “It is probable that Xi and his family will be allowed

**Most members of the CCP Central Committee confirmed at the 20th Party Congress in 2022 are Xi loyalists, so it is unlikely they will want to abandon Xi at the forthcoming Fourth Plenum.**

to ‘retire’ in peace, with some clear restraint on his movement. The Party reportedly agreed that it would not further degrade the status of Xi’s father or the prestige of the memorials to him.”<sup>18</sup>

Holt, the former Air Force general, reports that Xi’s mother in early June held a lunch with various party elders including Hu Jintao, Xi’s immediate predecessor as general secretary, and Wen Jiabao, who served as premier under Hu. Holt believes the meeting was to “broker a deal for a peaceful transition that would spare Xi humiliation and his life.”<sup>19</sup>

Holt believes the transition could take place by the Fourth Plenum, which might be held in August: “The stage is set and the Party is working to resolve which leader they will unify behind.”<sup>20</sup>

Another option for Party leaders is to keep Xi in place as a figurehead. “Xi Jinping could merely drift into irrelevance, which is what happened to Hua Guofeng, Mao Zedong’s designated successor who was slowly and gently pushed aside by Deng Xiaoping,” Burton told me.<sup>21</sup>

Deng, considered the Communist Party’s “Second Generation” leader, avoided the chaos accompanying Mao Zedong’s many purges, where death was sometimes the punishment imposed. After Deng lowered the cost of losing political struggles, Xi, by jailing opponents and their families and stripping them of their assets, reversed that trend. Xi could be dealt harshly as well, but his tormentors might decide to spare him an unpleasant fate in order to show unity at a time of crisis. “The Party,” noted Copley, “needs to project an image that it is in control and is now working toward a restoration of

sound trading and investment relations with the U.S. and other powers.”<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, a transition from Xi, whether kept around or not, may not be smooth. For one thing, Gen. Zhang Youxia has made demands of successors. “The fly in the ointment is Zhang, who now shows little appetite for ceding military control to any civilian leader,” noted Holt.<sup>23</sup> Rumors say the general has already vetoed one potential replacement because that person demanded the reassertion of civilian control over the People’s Liberation Army.

China could go through either a period of formal martial law or a period where the military is informally in control of the country. The PLA, after all, may be the only institution now capable of holding China together. As Copley stated, “The damage done to the Chinese economy by Xi Jinping is so profound that the Party may find it difficult—no matter what it does—to calm both the domestic population and foreign investors and traders.”<sup>24</sup>

Zhang’s effective control over the Communist Party may bring some semblance of stability, but the respite can only be temporary. The country faces simultaneous crises, such as an apparently contracting economy, and long-term afflictions, most fundamentally collapsing demography. No general or admiral will be able to solve these underlying afflictions. As Jeff King correctly pointed out in the *Daily Caller* in June, “Xi’s domestic mismanagement has pushed the Chinese Communist Party to the edge of legitimacy.”<sup>25</sup>

By now, most everyone in the leadership blames Xi Jinping for either creating or aggravating China’s problems. He is certainly responsible for making a

**By now, most everyone in the leadership blames Xi Jinping for either creating or aggravating China’s problems.**

bad situation worse, but it would be premature to count him out. Mao Zedong, Xi's hero, returned from political oblivion several times, as did Deng. Chinese Communist strongmen have a way of coming back despite the odds.

Many say that China will now return to a calmer era and that Xi Jinping is merely an aberration. Anything can happen, but strongmen—Mao, Deng, and Xi—have dominated the period of CCP rule. If anything, the calm times were aberrations.

There were calm times during the era of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the Party's Third and Fourth Generation leaders. These peaceful periods led even critics of the regime, most notably Columbia University's Andrew Nathan, to proclaim that the CCP had solved the one problem plaguing hardline regimes: succession.<sup>26</sup> Many marveled that the Party had succeeded in institutionalizing norms, guidelines, rules, and practices that ensured orderly transitions from one leader to the next.

The CCP, in reality, has yet to overcome the succession problem. There were smooth transitions from Deng to Jiang and from Jiang to Hu but only because Deng hand-picked both Jiang and Hu. Deng could not see so far in the future to designate Hu's successor, so he did not pick Xi Jinping. Xi has now upended the Communist Party by junking all the institutional restraints that so many had praised.

Strongman rule, in reality, is inherent in the Party's brutal system, which idealizes domination, struggle, and violence.

Even if Xi Jinping has agreed to exit gracefully, the transition from his rule is bound to be turbulent, if not now then in the near future.

So why do we care? Because instability in China could convince regime figures to solve their political problems by lashing out. Mao started the Cultural Revolution to sideline political enemies. He did not have a capable military, so he could not begin a war for this purpose. Now, the People's Liberation

Army is capable enough to start conflicts, so Xi or someone else could be tempted to use it not to rally the Chinese people—they clearly do not want war now—but to prevent political enemies at home from mounting challenges.

The other risk is that the Chinese regime, which for years has been provoking countries on China's periphery with "gray zone"—low-level—military tactics, will not be able to defuse crises that it triggers. Unfortunately, only the most hostile responses are now considered acceptable in a militarized and highly turbulent Beijing.

Xi in recent years has mobilized all of society for war, but now China itself is unstable. It is not clear who, if anyone, is in charge. Therefore, the regime, whoever controls it, can take the world by surprise.

---

Gordon G. Chang is the author of *Plan Red: China's Project to Destroy America* and *The Coming Collapse of China*. Follow him on X @ GordonGChang.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Xi Jinping’s Central Position in Official Media Starts to Erode,” China Brief, June 21, 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/xi-jinpings-central-position-in-official-media-starts-to-erode/>.
- 2 Demetri Sevastopulo, “Top Chinese General Removed in Xi Jinping’s Latest Purge,” *Financial Times* (London), April 10, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/8226e1d9-2e4a-4079-8f3c-2ae877ba5ba9>.
- 3 Brandon Tran and Gerui Zhang, “PLA Factions and the Erosion of Xi’s Power Over the Military,” China Brief, March 15, 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-factions-and-the-erosion-of-xis-power-over-the-military/>.
- 4 @jenniferzeng97, X.com, May 23, 2025 at 9:25 PM, <https://x.com/jenniferzeng97/status/1926087099347853562?s=61>.
- 5 Charles Burton, telephone interview by author, June 24, 2025.
- 6 Lam, “Xi Jinping’s Central Position in Official Media Starts to Erode.”
- 7 Blaine Holt, text message to author, June 24, 2025.
- 8 Charles Burton, e-mail message to author, June 23, 2025.
- 9 Charles Burton, e-mail message to author, June 23, 2025.
- 10 Charles Burton, e-mail message to author, June 23, 2025.
- 11 Charles Burton, e-mail message to author, June 23, 2025.
- 12 Charles Burton, telephone conference with author, June 24, 2025.
- 13 Charles Burton, e-mail message to author, July 2, 2025. Burton was referring to this: “Xi Focus: Xi Stresses Advancing Full, Rigorous Party Self-Governance Through Forging Good Conduct,” Xinhua News Agency, June 30, 2025, <http://english.news.cn/20250630/d524fd0e8c6c4a59be23962194b-8449c/c.html>.
- 14 Lam, “Xi Jinping’s Central Position in Official Media Starts to Erode.”
- 15 Lam, “Xi Jinping’s Central Position in Official Media Starts to Erode.”
- 16 Lam, “Xi Jinping’s Central Position in Official Media Starts to Erode.”
- 17 Gregory Copley, e-mail message to author, June 24, 2025.

- 18 Gregory Copley, e-mail message to author, June 23, 2025.
- 19 Blaine Holt, text message to author, June 24, 2025.
- 20 Blaine Holt, text message to author, June 24, 2025.
- 21 Charles Burton, telephone conference with author, June 24, 2025.
- 22 Gregory Copley, e-mail message to author, June 23, 2025.
- 23 Blaine Holt, text message to author, June 24, 2025.
- 24 Gregory Copley, e-mail message to author, June 23, 2025.
- 25 Jeff King, “Xi’s Dead Generals and China’s Hidden Civil War,” Daily Caller News Foundation, June 19, 2025, <https://dailycaller.com/2025/06/19/opinion-xis-dead-generals-and-chinas-hidden-civil-war-jeff-king/>.
- 26 Andrew J. Nathan, “China’s Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience,” *Journal of Democracy*, January 2003, p. 6, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/chinas-changing-of-the-guard-authoritarian-resilience/>.



[www.pacificresearch.org](http://www.pacificresearch.org)

**MAILING ADDRESS**

PO Box 60485

Pasadena, CA 91116

Tel 415-989-0833

**SACRAMENTO OFFICE**

2110 K Street, Suite 28

Sacramento, CA 95816

Tel 916-389-9774

**PASADENA OFFICE**

680 E. Colorado Blvd., Suite 180

Pasadena, CA 91101

Tel 626-714-7572

**CONNECT WITH US**



[facebook.com/pacificresearchinstitute](https://facebook.com/pacificresearchinstitute)



[@pacificresearch](https://twitter.com/pacificresearch)



[youtube.com/pacificresearch1](https://youtube.com/pacificresearch1)



[www.linkedin.com/company/  
pacific-research-institute](https://www.linkedin.com/company/pacific-research-institute)



[pacificresearchinstitute](https://instagram.com/pacificresearchinstitute)