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# Purge in Beijing - internal crisis of leadership without influence on foreign policy



The removal of 2 ministers without explanation and after a very short time in office suggests that Chinese leader Xi Jinping has considerable problems recruiting leading government officials, which is significant in autocratic regimes.

Defence Minister Li Shangfu is the latest victim of a purge in China's leadership, just 3 months after the removal of Foreign Minister Qin Gang. Both were replaced following a protracted and inexplicable absence from the public eye, and without any explanation to the public.

Both spent only 7 months on the job, even though during the last months of their official mandate (Qin 3 months and Li 2 months), they were inexplicably absent from the public eye, and their exact location was unknown.

It will take some time to state the real reasons for removing Li Shangfu, Minister of Defence and member of the State Council. Perhaps real reasons will never come to light.

## Corruption as the most probable reason

The first motive that comes to mind is participation in corruption. Before becoming defence minister last March, Li Shangfu was head of the Equipment Development Department of the Central Military Commission.

It is the body that controls all procurement for the People's Liberation Army and is part of the Central Military Commission led by President Xi.

This department of the Chinese army was put under an anti-corruption investigation last July, including suspicions of "leaking information on projects and army units." At the same time, several commanders of the Chinese Rocket Force were replaced and put under investigation, also without explanation.

Therefore, it is quite possible that Li Shangfu

came to the ministerial position with a lot of dirty laundry, and now it is time to pay.

Corruption, as the most probable motive for the dismissal of the Minister of Defence, also arises because its eradication occupies a central place in Xi Jinping's policy.

Individuals from the top of the army are an easy target for removal because corruption is traditionally rooted not only as a way to become wealthy but, above all, as a condition for career advancement.

This practically means that no senior officer could rest easy from accusations of corruption because, from the very start of their careers, they were forced to participate in it in order to advance.

## Is Xi showing weakness?

It is less probable that Li Shangfu's removal is related to his possible opposition to the principal state course regarding defence, given that both the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Foreign Affairs do not have significant levers of influence within their departments because those levers are at the party leadership.

However, frequent changes at the very top of the government in Beijing speak of turbulence that President Xi has not faced in the last 10 years he has been in power.

Whatever the motive for the purges, Xi could present them as proof of his leadership strength and determination in the fight against corruption as the principal features of his rule.

His frequent replacement policy, however, already exposes at least 2 of his weaknesses as the undisputed leader of the party and state hierarchy: either he failed to adequately evaluate the quality and loyalty of candidates for the highest state positions, or he failed to oversee the process of their appointment personally.

## Factional conflicts

In both cases, Xi's image as an infallible leader who controls all processes in the country, particularly the complicated channels of advancement at the top of the state hierarchy, is being eroded.

The replacement of 2 leading state officials in just 3 months, and at the start of their mandates, gives scope for suspicions that there has been turbulence at the highest level in Beijing that is getting out of control.

"The competition between various factions within the party will get more intense, complicated, and brutal than ever before," Cai Xia, a former professor at the Central Party School of the CCP, a victim of the state purge, who immigrated to the US, wrote in Foreign Affairs a year ago.

Factional and personal conflicts, sometimes less, sometimes more intensive, within the Chinese leadership, are not new, given that they existed in all previous ruling groups.

But in Xi's model of governance, they are causing far more damage to him than anyone before him because Xi eliminated the practice of collective leadership of the most significant processes and centralised authority in his own hands.

Because of this, he gained the status of an undisputed leader, like no one since the Mao Zedong era, but on the other hand, also the burden of responsibility for wrong decisions. In this respect, the removal of 2 ministers is an admission of error that impacts the leader.

## Renewal of dialogue between China and the US

The departure of Defence Minister Li Shangfu, under mysterious circumstances, will not affect the principal direction of China's defence policy, given that it is not a question of a position that dominantly influences the creation and implementation of that policy.

However, there may be significant improvement in the military-to-military dialogue between China and the US in the coming days. This dialogue, as one of the principal obstacles to the stabilisation of the overall relations between the 2 countries, has been suspended for more than a year.

The Pentagon confirmed that its high representative, Cynthia Carras, will participate in the Beijing Xiangshan security forum, and the Chinese Ministry of Defence at the same time announced that it "attached great importance to the development of military-to-military relations between China and the United States."

This ministry will participate in the reactivation of the dialogue with the US without its leading man. This shows that the motives for the purge are exclusively internal, and possible consequences will affect only the Beijing leadership, not its most significant foreign policy decisions.