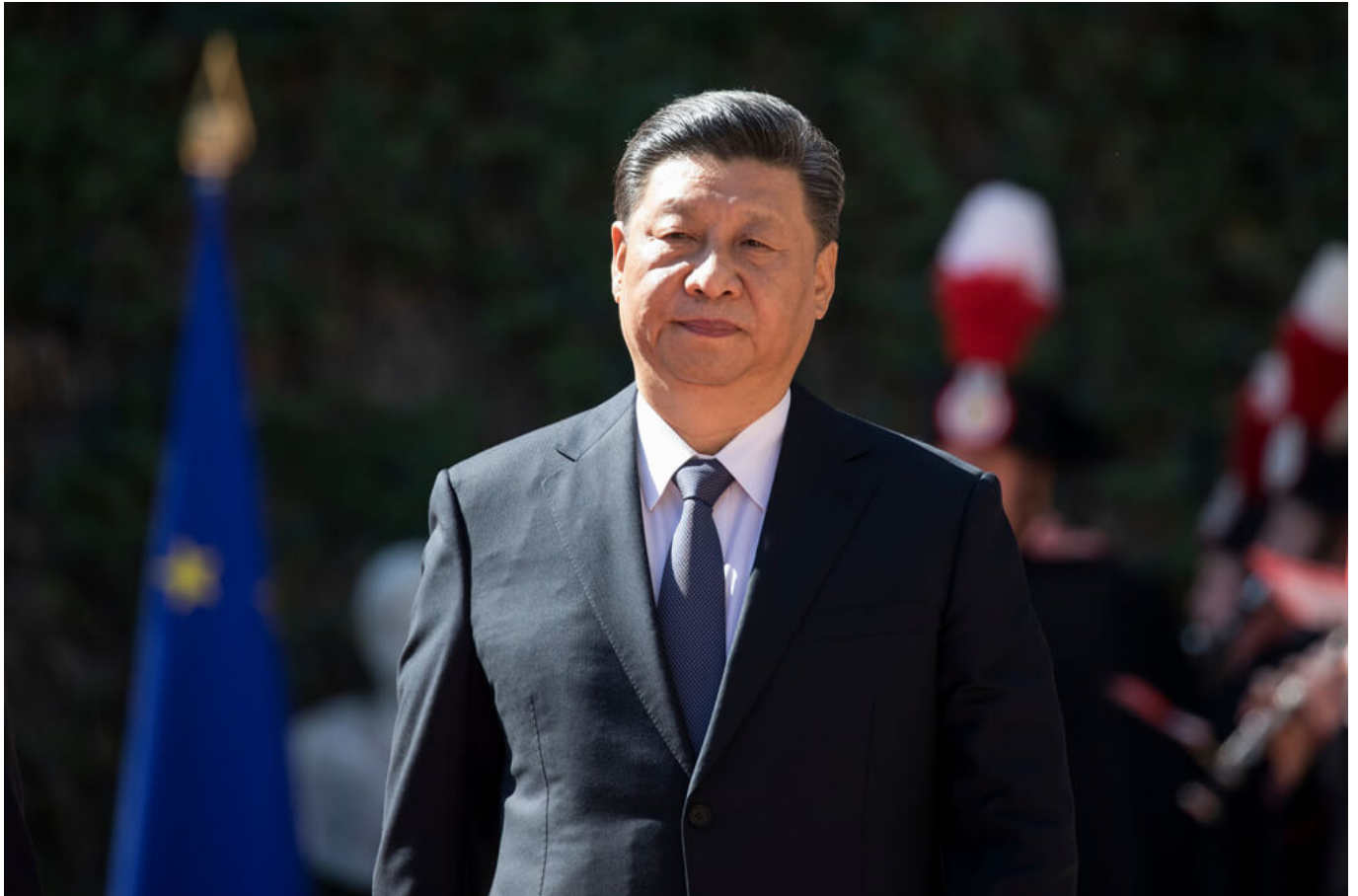




By: *Brahma Chellaney*

Xi's purges – How to distinguish allies from foes?



During his 13 years in power, Xi Jinping has steadily **tightened his grip** on all levers of authority in China – the Communist Party of China (CPC), the state apparatus, and the military – while expanding surveillance into virtually every aspect of society.

Yet his recent purge of nine **top-ranking generals**, like those before it, shows that he still sees enemies everywhere.

After taking power in 2012, Xi launched a crackdown on corruption within the CPC and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The campaign was initially popular, because China's one-party system is rife with graft and **abuse of power**.

But it soon became clear that enforcement was highly selective – a tool not for building a more transparent or effective system, but for consolidating power in Xi's hands.

In Xi's China, advancement depends less on competence or integrity than on earning the leader's **personal trust**.

But even after more than a decade of promoting only loyalists, Xi continues to dismiss officials regularly, including top **military commanders**.

According to the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, nearly **five million officials** at all levels of government have been indicted for corruption under Xi.

And this is to say nothing of those who simply **disappear** without explanation.

True to form, Xi's regime claims that the military leaders swept up by his latest purge – including General He Weidong, a member of the Politburo, Vice Chair of the Central Military Commission, and the third-highest-ranking figure in **China's military hierarchy** – committed “disciplinary violations” and “duty-related crimes.”

But a more plausible explanation is that Xi is playing an **interminable game** of Whac-a-Rival,

desperately trying to preserve his **grip on power**.

Each new purge deepens mistrust among China's elite

Xi's fears are not entirely misplaced: each new purge deepens mistrust among China's elite and risks turning former loyalists into enemies.

From Mao Zedong to Joseph Stalin, there is ample evidence that one-man rule breeds paranoia.

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By now, Xi may well have lost the ability to distinguish **allies from foes**. At 72, Xi remains so insecure in his position that, unlike even Mao, he has refused to designate a **successor**, fearing that a visible heir could hasten his own downfall.

None of this bodes well for China. By refusing to lay the groundwork for an eventual leadership transition, Xi sharply increases the risk that the end of his rule – however that comes – will usher in political instability.

In the meantime, Xi's emphasis on personal fealty over ideological conformity is weakening institutional cohesion in a system once grounded in collective leadership.

Coupled with his arbitrary firings and prosecutions, Chinese governance is now increasingly defined by sycophancy and anxiety, rather than competence and consistency.

Military is paying a particularly steep price

China's military is paying a particularly **steep**

price for Xi's insecurity. In recent years, the PLA has undergone sweeping structural reforms aimed at transforming it into a modern fighting force capable of "winning **informationized wars**."

But Xi's **purges** risk undermining this effort by disrupting military planning and leadership.

For example, his abrupt removal in 2023 of the leaders of the PLA's Rocket Force, which oversees China's arsenal of nuclear and conventional missiles, may have jeopardized China's strategic deterrent.

Replacing experienced commanders with untested loyalists might ensure Xi's political survival – and Chinese leaders have often used the military to safeguard their own power – but it does nothing for national security.

And when generals are preoccupied primarily with political survival, both morale and operational readiness suffer.



Can the PLA fight and win a war against a major adversary like the United States or India while operating under the political constraints Xi has imposed on it?

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So far, Xi has advanced his expansionist agenda through stealth and coercion rather than open warfare.

But a paranoid leader surrounded by sycophants unwilling or unable to challenge him is always at risk of strategic

miscalculation.

Recall that Stalin decimated the Red Army's leadership on the eve of the Nazi invasion – with disastrous results.

In Xi's case, it might be China that does the invading, if he orders an amphibious assault on Taiwan.

Xi seems able to rule only through fear

For all the pomp surrounding China's rise, the country is beset by structural problems, including a slowing economy, rising youth unemployment, and an aging and declining population.

Popular discontent may well be growing, but it is masked by repression, just as any potential challenge to Xi's leadership is preempted by purges and prosecutions. Ultimately, Xi seems able to rule only through fear.

But fear is not a foundation for long-term stability. A leader consumed by fear of disloyalty may command obedience but not genuine fidelity.

Mao's purges culminated in chaos and national trauma. Xi's methods are more sophisticated, but the underlying logic is the same

Obedience is not merely a poor substitute for strength; it can become a source of fragility, as it leaves little room for creativity, competency, or collaboration.

The great irony of Xi's approach is that the more he seeks to consolidate power in his own hands, the more vulnerable his rule becomes.

Mao's purges culminated in chaos and national trauma. Xi's methods are more sophisticated, but the underlying logic is the same – as could be the results.

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