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After Spectacles in Karakalpak Civilian Trials, Uzbek Authorities Sentence 3 Law Enforcement Officers With Little Fanfare

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On July 31, Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced that two generals from other branches of China's military would be taking over the two top leadership positions in the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF). A report by the South China Morning Post claims that the former commander and deputy commander of the PLARF are under investigation for corruption, but Beijing has not given an official reason for their dismissal. Turmoil at the top of the PLARF provides a valuable glimpse into the persistent challenges on China's road to becoming a modern military.

Although it has not been confirmed as the cause, corruption is a plausible explanation for the PLARF leadership shakeup. Corruption has long been a serious problem within the PLA, especially during the "reform and opening up" period, which saw meteoric economic growth and, by Xi's reckoning, lax discipline. Rooting out corruption has thus been one of the major goals of Xi's military reforms.

While anti-corruption campaigns have undoubtedly removed potential rivals to Xi's hold on power, they have also been essential for emphasizing the Communist Party's control over the PLA and enabling organizational changes necessary to turn the PLA into a modern military. In other words, Xi has made an explicit link between combatting corruption in the PLA and the military's readiness to fight wars.

Indeed, since the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection has arrested nearly 40 officials, including members of the armed forces, in a new anti-corruption campaign. China is in the midst of a large expansion of its nuclear arsenal, which has meant a big influx of cash for the PLARF to expand its missile forces and supporting infrastructure. That's fertile ground for officials looking to make a quick buck on the side.

The PLARF leadership shuffle also comes at a time of growing concern about China's designs against Taiwan.

Senior U.S. military and civilian officials have repeatedly called attention to the PLA's expanding military capabilities. Depending on one's point of view, the year 2027 — the PLA's centenary — is either a deadline for invasion or the year that Xi believes the military will be ready to launch a future attack on short notice. Fears of a looming Chinese attack on Taiwan are

influencing policy debates on the pace of U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan, the prioritization of sending weapons to Taiwan or Ukraine, and the merits of dropping “strategic ambiguity” in favor of a clearer U.S. defense commitment to Taiwan.

Undergirding many of the debates and handwringing among U.S. policymakers and analysts is the assumption that the PLA is well on its way to becoming a highly capable fighting force. On the surface, this assumption appears correct. The quantity and quality of the PLA’s material capabilities — ships, aircraft, missiles, etc. — has improved very rapidly. Highly publicized war games present worrying scenarios where the PLA uses its large numbers of high-quality weapons systems to quickly inflict massive pain on both Taiwan and forward-deployed U.S. forces.

The PLARF shakeup, however, is a valuable reminder that counting ships or analyzing missile accuracy only tells us part of the story. While they are more difficult to measure, intangible factors like training, morale, and organizational culture are equally if not more important than weapons systems. The collapse of the U.S.-equipped Afghan military and Ukraine’s effective defense against Russia’s invasion demonstrate the importance of intangible factors and shows how better equipment on its own is not decisive.

While the PLA has made impressive strides in fielding advanced capabilities, it is still contending with disciplinary issues at high levels despite almost a decade of concerted effort by military and civilian leadership to root out corruption. The PLA faces other challenges despite many years of reform, including a lack of realism in training exercises, poor quality of conscripts, and difficulty of integrating various commands and systems responsible for wartime mobilization. The PLA has undoubtedly improved in all of these areas, but per a recent RAND study, “The PLA’s views of the [China-U.S.] military balance should be viewed as a story of mixed success, continued challenges, and unrealized potential.”

The recent PLARF leadership shuffle should curb the recent threat inflation around a looming Chinese attack on Taiwan. Although China’s military has made big strides in a short period of time, it faces persistent challenges such as corruption that hinder both its ability to reform and its ability to effectively fight wars. American policymakers and analysts alike should thus widen their aperture when considering the PLA’s strengths and weaknesses.

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