

China's military corruption crackdown explained

AFP– Chinese defence minister Dong Jun has been placed under investigation for corruption, according to British newspaper the Financial Times.

The reports, if confirmed, would make him the third defence minister in just over a year to fall foul of a sweeping crackdown in the country's military.

Analysts say corruption may have eroded Chinese combat readiness – raising fears in Beijing as it conducts its largest military build-up in decades.

Here's how the crackdown has unfolded so far:

– 'Chronic distrust' –

Chinese President Xi Jinping has waged a sweeping campaign against deep-seated official corruption since coming to power over a decade ago.

Proponents say the policy promotes clean governance, while critics say it helps Xi purge political rivals.

In the past year, that drive has focused on the armed forces, with nearly 20 military and defence industry officials removed since summer 2023.

Some of the biggest fish so far ensnared have been Dong's predecessors.

State media has confirmed that both Wei Fenghe and his successor Li Shangfu have been expelled from the ruling Communist Party and are under corruption investigations.

"Xi appears to be chronically distrustful of his most

prominent military officials,” Ankit Panda, Stanton Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told AFP.

Analysts at the time linked the purge to a wider investigation into the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) Rocket Force, which oversees China’s nuclear and conventional missiles and would likely be Beijing’s first line of attack in the event of a major conflict.

Both former defence ministers had links to the force – Wei previously headed the unit and Li Shangfu led a department that developed weapons including missiles.

The unit’s chief, Li Yuchao, and chief of staff, Sun Jinming, were expelled from the party and investigated for corruption in July.

Three senior officials were also removed from their posts at state-owned missile defence organisations in December 2023.

– Beyond the Rocket Force –

But Dong’s removal, if confirmed, could suggest that the state’s crackdown on corruption is widening.

The defence minister – appointed in December – had no ties to the rocket force, instead forging his career in the navy and eventually becoming its commander.

Victor Shih, an expert on elite Chinese politics, noted that in that role, Dong had “authority over tens of billions in procurement per year”.

And his reported fall suggests “the rot in China’s military remains even deeper than previously suspected,” Neil Thomas, a fellow on Chinese politics at the Asia Society, told AFP.

The crackdown has come as China has increased military pressure on Taiwan and repeatedly pushed up against its

neighbours over disputed territory in the South China Sea.

But analysts say graft in the military may be raising worries that the army isn't up to the job.

"Corruption in the Chinese military rightly should raise questions about its ability to achieve military objectives and reach the 'great rejuvenation' envisioned by Xi," Heather Williams, director of the Project on Nuclear Issues at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies wrote.

– Compromised –

Bloomberg, citing US intelligence, reported this year that rampant corruption in the Rocket Force had led to malfunctioning equipment and even missile fuel being replaced with water.

"If true, these flaws would compromise missile operations, calling into question China's nuclear force readiness and overall capabilities," the Federation of American Scientists wrote in an open letter in response to the claims.

Xi has vowed that the reunification of the Chinese mainland and Taiwan is inevitable and pledged to take "all measures necessary" to achieve that goal.

The recent crackdown "raises the question of who Xi has left that he can trust and how deep the scandals run that have taken down these key officials," said Joel Wuthnow, senior research fellow at National Defense University in the US.

"It has to be a huge distraction... as he presses the PLA to be ready for a war with Taiwan by 2027."

This month, Xi visited members of the country's air force in central Hubei province, urging them to root out corruption and "unhealthy tendencies".

“(We) must keep firmly in mind our duties and missions, increase our sense of war preparedness and tighten our preparations for military struggles,” Xi told soldiers.

But with the reported fall of the third defence minister in a row, analysts expect the corruption crackdown to continue to distract from that goal.

“Competition for top positions is so fierce that there might be some mutual recriminations between officers which would lead to endless cycles of arrests, new appointments and recriminations,” Shih said.

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