



China's Naval Leadership: Corruption & Capabilities



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“Almost as Many as Drummers in *Spinal Tap*”

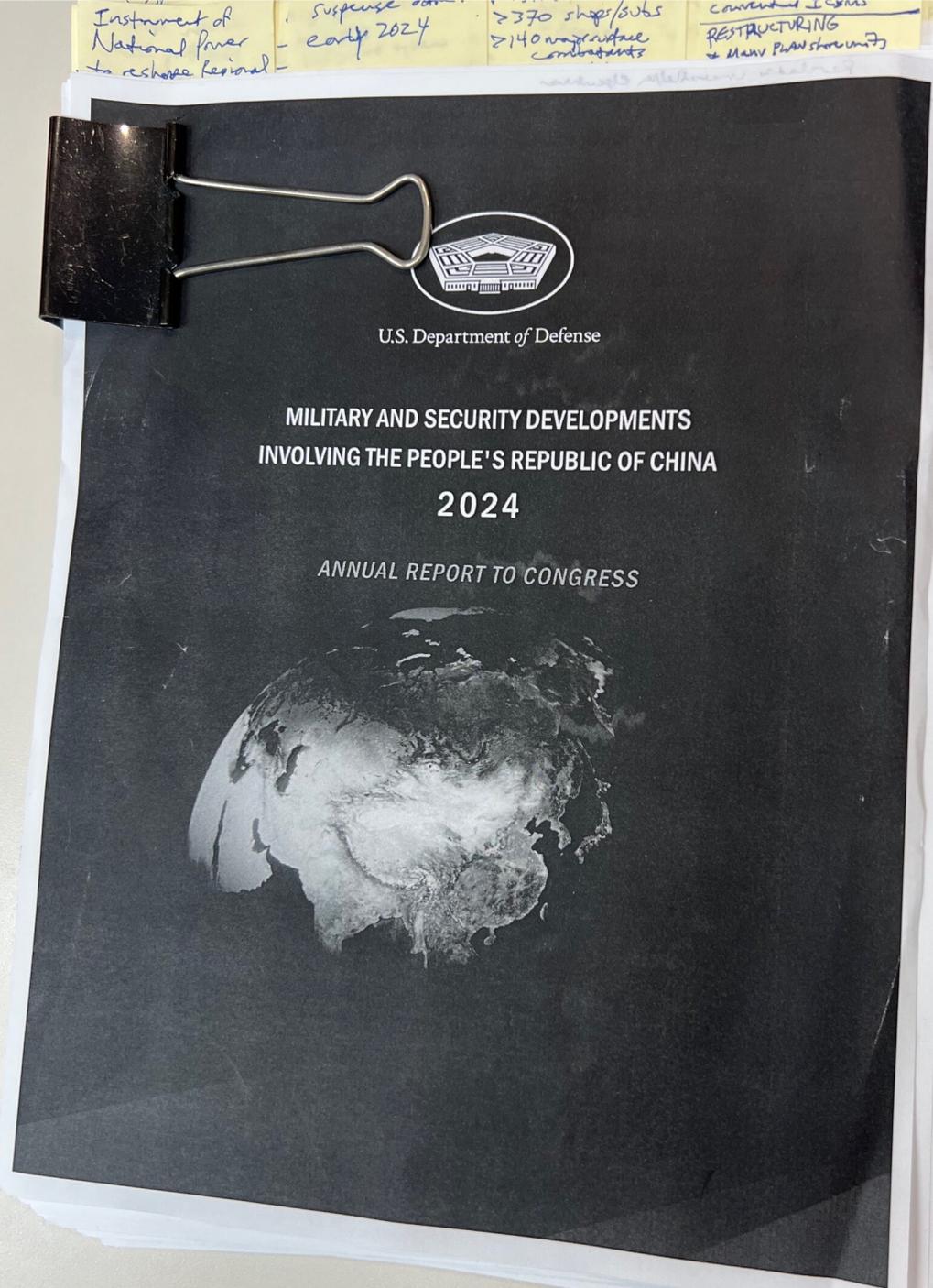
- **Removed since Xi assumed power (2012):**
 - **15+ senior military officials & defense industry executives.**
 - 8 CMC members, including Vice Chairman General He Weidong.
 - 15+ military deputies to National People’s Congress (since March 2023 alone).
 - 79+ senior PLA officials at the Vice Admiral/Lieutenant General (2-star) level & above.
 - Nearly entire PLA Rocket Force leadership (August 2024).
 - **12 PLAN officers at the Rear Admiral (1-star) level or above have been, or are rumored to have been, dismissed.**
- Anti-“corruption” fight heightening in 2025...
- Dramatic rumors swirling...
 - “Shoes” continuing to drop.
 - Hyperbolic headlines surged after Pentagon’s 18 December 2024 *China Military Power Report* release, with “Impacts of Corruption on the PLA” one of 3 Special Topics.
 - **Implications for PLA control & capabilities?**



Key Questions

1. *How do recent purges of PLAN leaders impact the service's operational readiness?*
2. *How do these leadership changes affect the navy's ability to achieve key milestone objectives*, such as its 2027 Centennial Military Building Goal & 2035 modernization objectives?
3. *What has been the broader pattern of PLAN flag officer removals over time, and how has it affected the force?* More specifically, do these cases raise questions about the competence of senior PLAN leaders and therefore the capabilities of the PLAN as a service? If corruption is as endemic as these cases suggest, does that reflect negatively on the PLAN as a functioning organization?





Framing: Capability Forest Beyond Corruption Trees

- **3 things are true at once:**
 1. China's military remains **riddled with corruption...**
 2. ...despite rampant **removals under Xi...**
 3. ...but is nevertheless advancing in most **dramatic military buildup** since World War II.
- Were Xi and his Party Army as discombobulated as some preoccupied with the latest PLA "palace intrigue" or myopically focused on "corruption" imagine, no way they could be ***building, deploying & preparing the way they clearly are.***

Xi's Priorities: Warfighting Over Precautions or Prestige

- ***Xi prioritizes real warfighting capability (e.g., vs. Taiwan, per his Centennial Military Building Goal of 2027).***

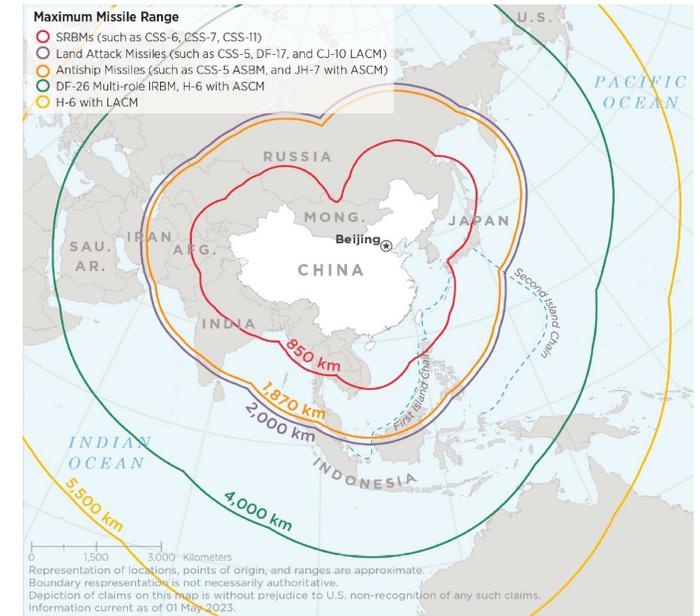
- **Imposes loyalty, control, ability to execute key military ops.**
- **Accepts risks/costs accordingly: temporary setbacks, bureaucratic churn.**
- **Accumulates potential resentment with purges (vs. predecessors' "buyoffs").**

- Moves far beyond "praetorian guard" preoccupation of less secure dictators.

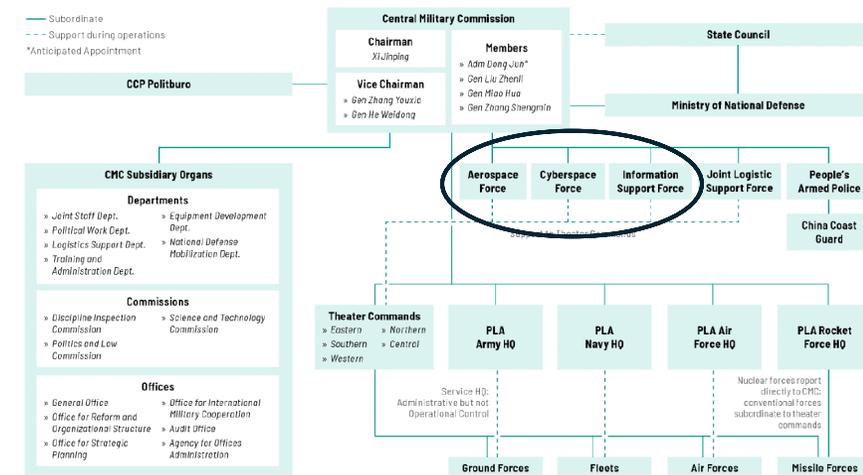
- Pursues military megaprojects, buildup & repeated reorganizations.

- Far costlier, riskier than readily achievable "prestige projects."
- **Strategic Support Force established 2015–16, disestablished 2024.**

FIELDED CONVENTIONAL STRIKE



MILITARY LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION



Xi's Loyalty Enforcement: Admiral Wang Renhua's CMC Politics & Law Commission

- **Coordinates all legal & enforcement authorities across PLA.**
 - Runs military courts and prosecutors' offices.
- Upgraded from Theater Command Deputy Leader to Theater Command Leader grade, same level as theaters & services.
 - To help root out "corruption" (as defined by Xi).
- **Headed by three-star (full) Admiral Wang Renhua.**
 - One of 18 top PRC security policymakers.
 - **Military loyalty enforcement boss?**





Endemic Corruption: Endless Struggle

- ***System feature, not bug.***
 - ***Rewards loyalists.***
 - Promotion pay-to-play, kickbacks, monetizing of (mis)managed resources.
 - Old opportunities: Equipment Departments—exceptional resources, exceptional graft.
 - ***New opportunities: Military-Civil Fusion—diverse military industry contracts/transactions, tempting resources/revenue.***
 - Will persist as long as Party remains (above law).
- Constant two-line power struggles = defining feature of CCP politics.
 - Bo Xilai's fall = recent example.
- ***PLA has long played role in elite power struggles.***
 - ***Paramount leader fears disloyalty within it.***
- ***Therefore, Xi's fight vs. corruption = unending, politicized battle.***

The Expendables: Removals Under Xi

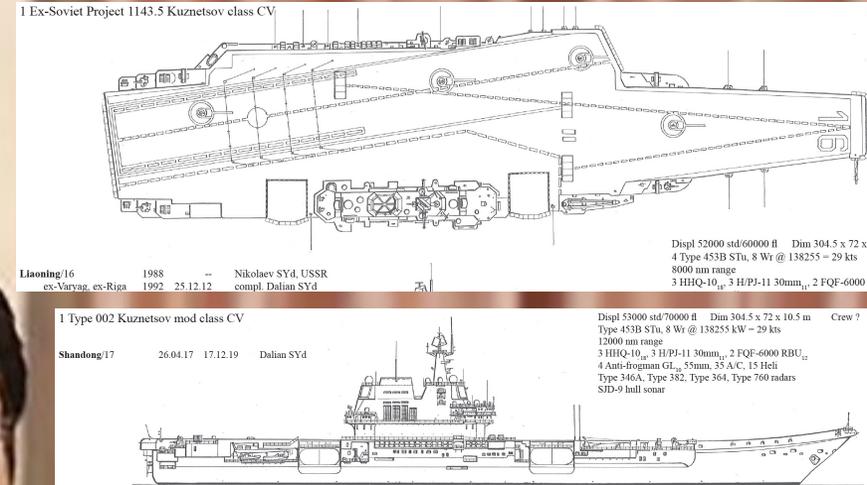
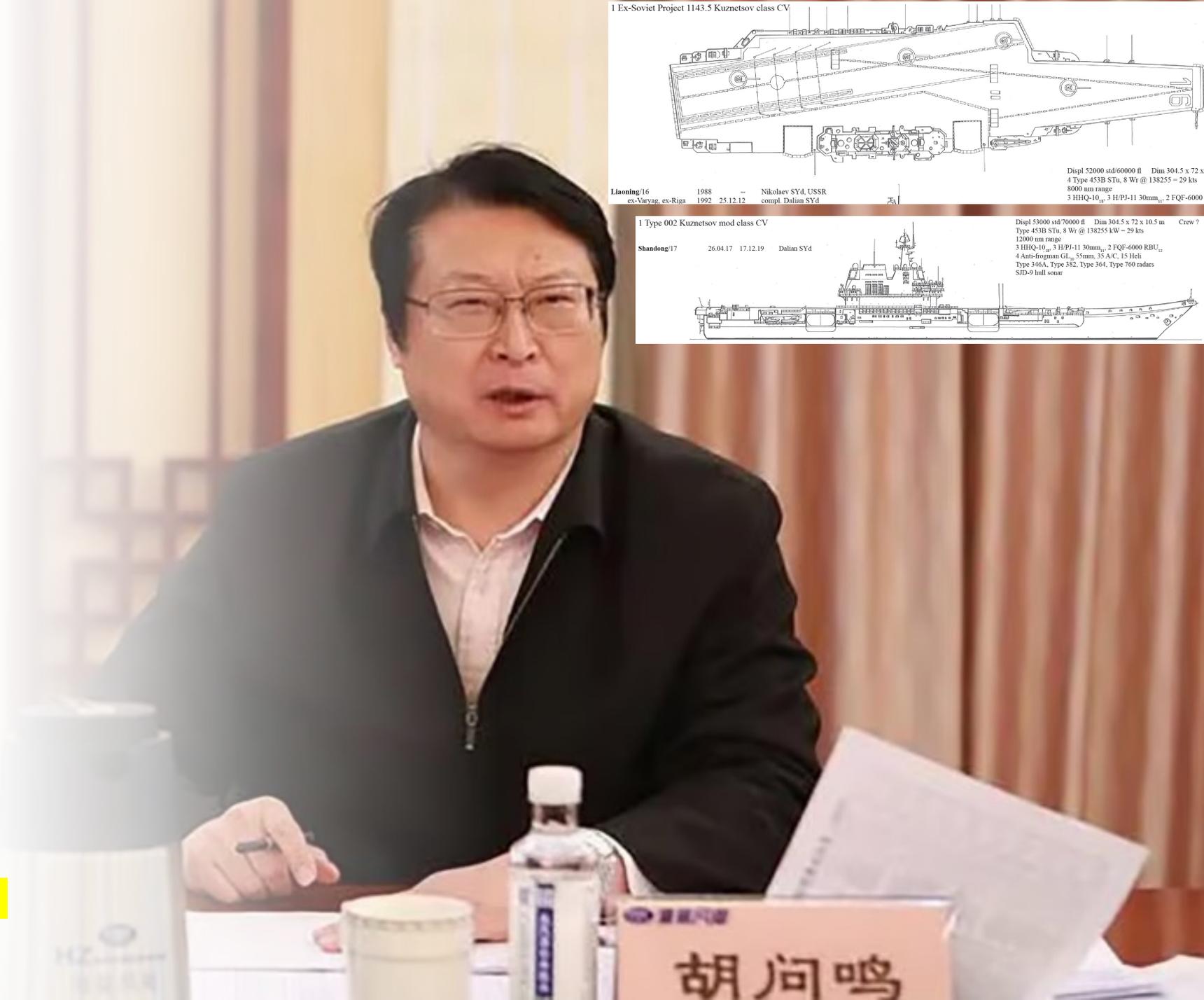
“The history with these investigations in the PLA are that once the string of corruption is pulled many other threads are revealed and the sweater unravels.”

— former CIA analyst
Dennis Wilder,
Georgetown University



Naval Shipbuilding Stakeholder: Hu Wenming

- **China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) Chairman, 2012–19.**
 - **Head of China's aircraft carrier program.**
 - **Oversaw development of *Liaoning* & *Shandong*.**
 - Reportedly member of 18th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI).
- 12 May 2020: under investigation by CCDI & National Supervisory Commission.
 - **26 December 2023: *sentenced to 13 years in prison.***
- **Former subordinate General Manager Sun Bo *sentenced to 12 years in prison* 4 July 2019.**



Admiral Miao Hua: Excessive Patronage Network?

- Xi's protégé?
 - Transferred from PLAA in 2014 to become PLAN's Political Commissar & receive 3rd Star in 2015.
- **“Mountaintopism” (山头主义) factionalism—with Party, State & Military officials developing their own alternative power centers—has long concerned CCP leaders.**
- Removal = example for PLA?
VC Zhang Youxia power flexing?
- **Credibility blowback for Xi's selection of atypical acolytes ultimately deemed unreliable?**



Vice Admiral Li Pengcheng: Replaceable Replacer

- Rising star.
- Defenestrated via 25 December 2024 NPC Report.
- Then-PLAN PC Miao Hua presided over his 2014 promotion to Rear Admiral. Any connections?
- **Replaced VADM Ju Xinchun as Commander, Southern Theater Command (STC) Navy ~1 year prior.**
 - **Ju dismissed from NPC 27 November 2023.**
 - **In 2015 Ju replaced Wang Yu as SSF Equipment Department Director after Wang dismissed from NPC.**
- Comparing/contrasting 2 consecutive PLAN STC Commanders serving in the same capacity, sacked one year apart, provides elucidates impact of sacking commander & corruption more broadly on PLAN operational capabilities & how they affect the force.



General He Weidong: Ironic Implosion

- 2nd CMC VC (March 2023–March 2025*)
- 10 January 2025 Discipline Inspection Commission Expanded Meeting: Speech stressing importance of achieving Xi's Centennial Military Building Goal of 2027, in part through unremitting anticorruption efforts.

“the discipline inspection and supervision work of the entire military has achieved new results and progress in the past year. This year, we must deepen political training, rectify work styles and fight corruption, strengthen political supervision, correct the atmosphere of selecting and employing people, crack down on corruption and punish evil with high pressure....”

- “We must promote the courage not to be corrupt, the inability to be corrupt, and the unwillingness to be corrupt.”



何卫东在出席中央军委纪委扩大会议时强调
深入推进全面从严治党全面从严治军
为打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战提供坚强保障

正午国防军事

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何卫东在出席中央军委纪委扩大会议时强调 深入推进全面从严治党全面从严治军 为打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战提供坚强保障

手机看 分享到

来源：新华社 作者：梅常伟 责任编辑：叶梦圆 发布：2025-01-10 18:03:14

何卫东在出席中央军委纪委扩大会议时强调

深入推进全面从严治党全面从严治军

为打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战提供坚强保障

北京1月10日电（记者梅常伟）中央军委纪委扩大会议10日在京召开。中共中央政治局委员、中央军委副主席何卫东出席会议并讲话，强调要坚持以习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想为指导，深入推进全面从严治党、全面从严治军，深刻领悟“两个确立”的决定性意义，做到“两个维护”，贯彻军委主席负责制，为打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战提供坚强保障。

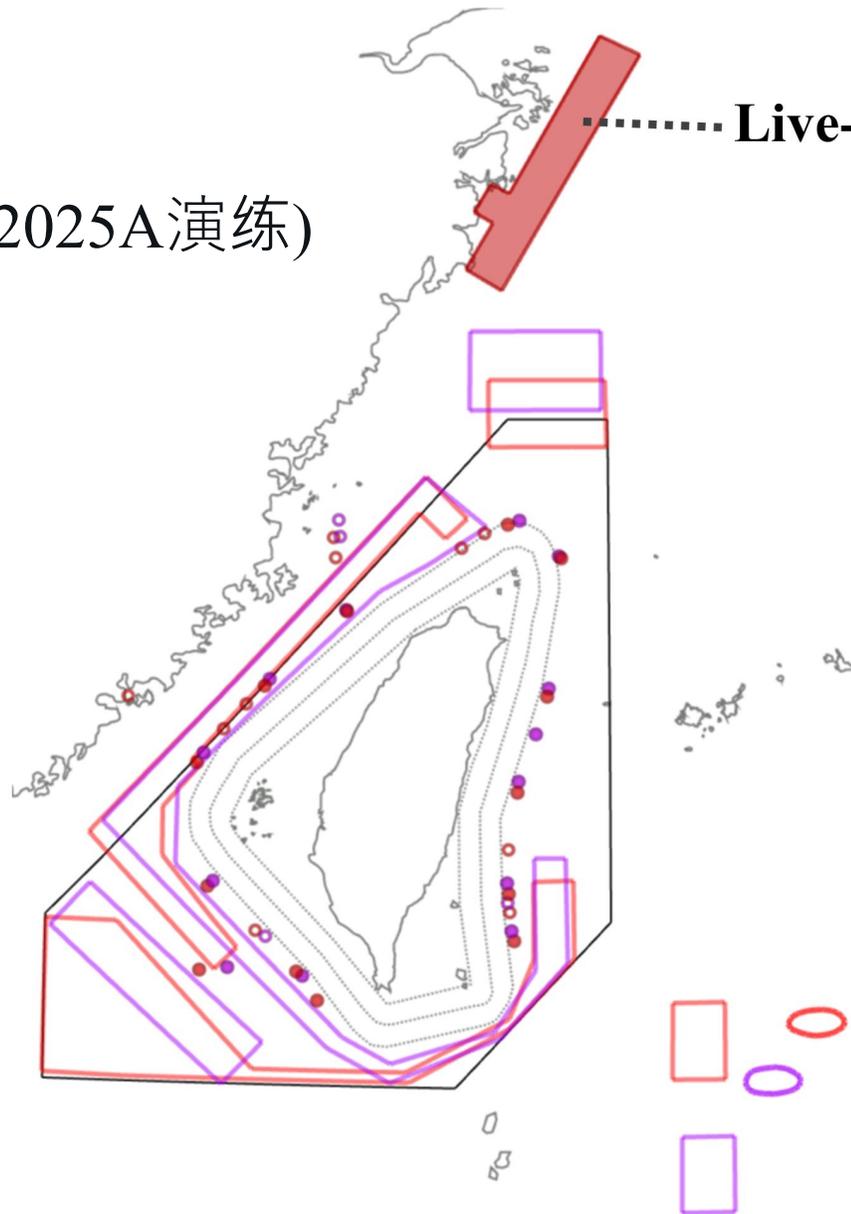
过去一年全军纪检监察工作取得新的成效和进步。今年要深入推进政治整训、正风反腐，强化政治监督，匡正选人用人风气，高压惩治腐败，深化政治治理，驰而不息纠治“四风”顽疾，扎实抓好整顿思想、整顿用人、整顿组织、整顿作风、整顿纪律，持续纯净政治生态。要围绕中心、服务大局，推动规划执行攻坚，助力深化改革创新，充分发挥监督保障执行作用。要一体推进不敢腐、不能腐、不想腐，坚持党性党风党纪一起抓，贯通发力，深化跨部门、跨领域、跨军地联动联治，压紧压实管党治党责任链条，坚决打好反腐败斗争攻坚战、持久战、总体战。

- 
- Caught in downfall of ADM Miao Hua, involved in Li's selection & promotions through flag ranks (like VADM Li Pengcheng)?
 - Overlap with VADM Li Pengcheng in promotion to flag, posting at PLAN HQ (2009–11) & service as deputies to the 13th + 14th NPCs.

VADM Li Hanjun: Rising Training & Education Star Extinguished

But The Beat Goes On... Strait Thunder 2025A

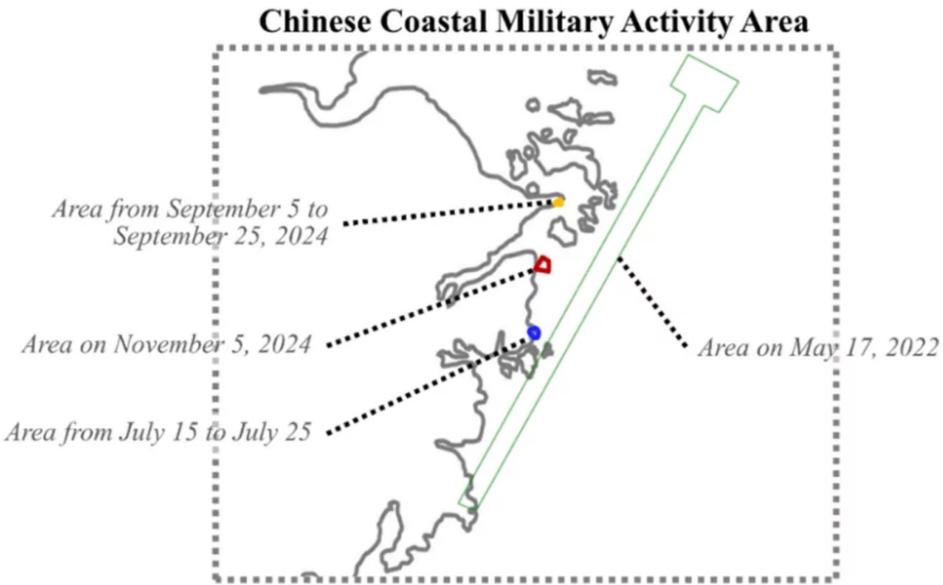
(海峡雷霆-2025A演练)



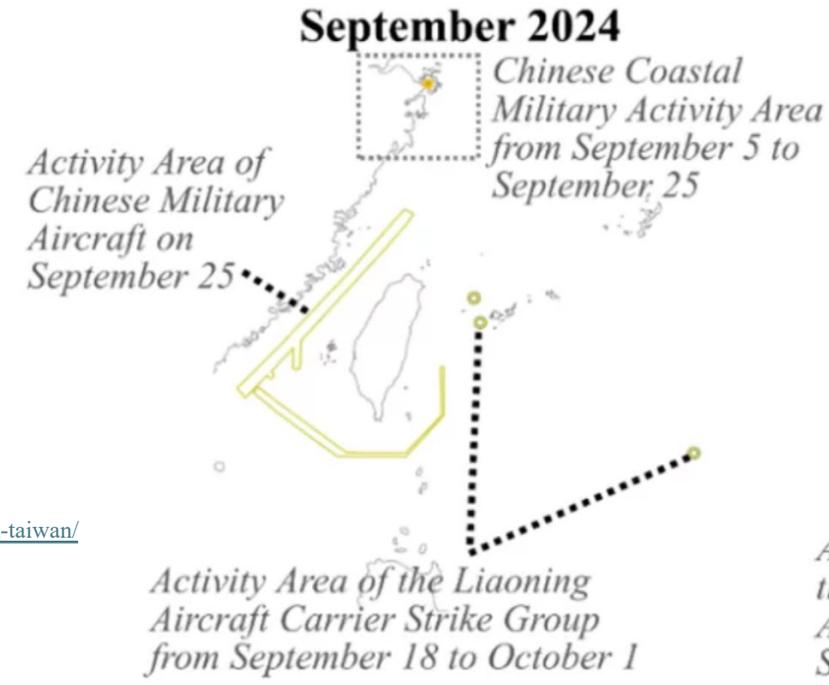
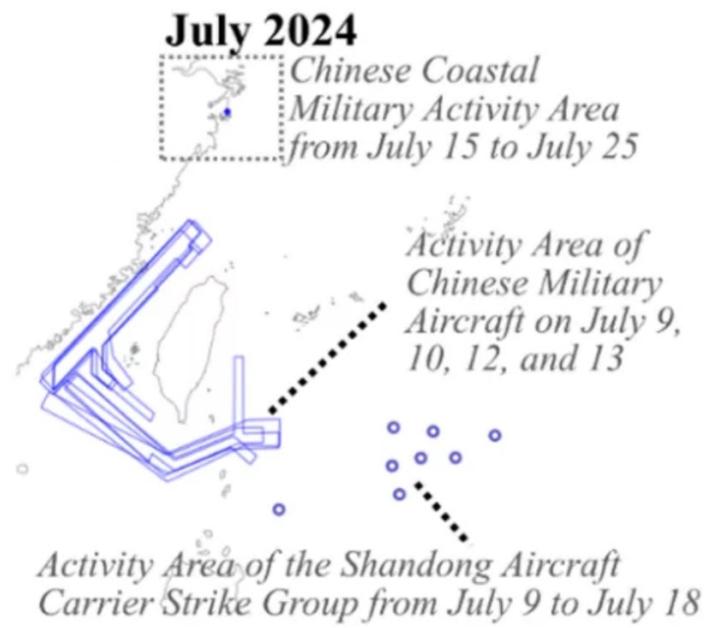
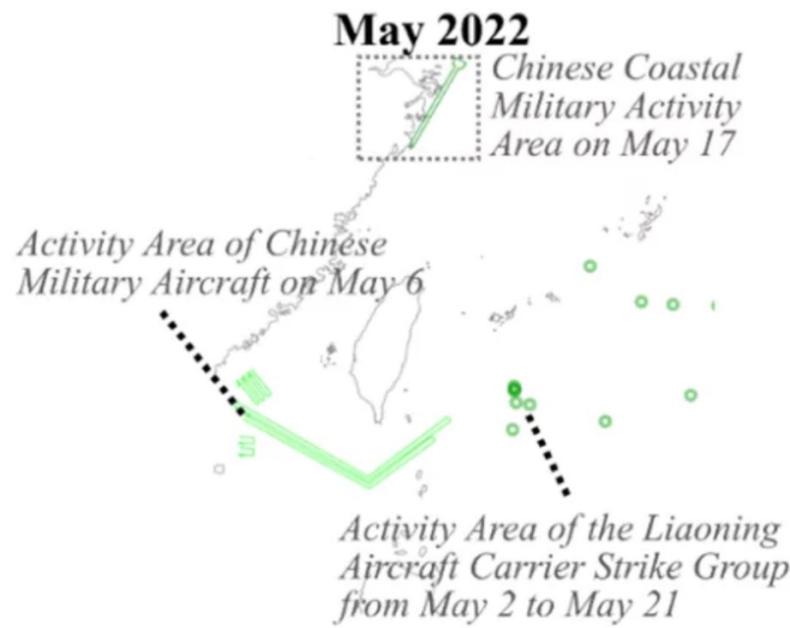
Live-Fire Drill Zone on April 2

April 1	●	PLA Navy Vessels
	○	CCG Vessels
	○	PLA Aircraft Carrier Strike Group
	□	PLA Aircraft
April 2	●	PLA Navy Vessels
	○	CCG Vessels
	○	PLA Aircraft Carrier Strike Group
	□	PLA Aircraft

Strait Thunder 2025A: **Latest in Series, Harbinger of Heightening**



<https://jamestown.org/program/strait-thunder-2025a-drill-implies-future-increase-in-pla-pressure-on-taiwan/>



Admiral Yuan Huazi: All Over But the Shouting?

- PLAN PC = inherently public role.
- But last seen at All-Military Special Seminar for Senior Military Cadres (7 September 2024).
- Absent from meetings he should have attended subsequently.
- Including utmost importance that cluster events of from the end of the calendar year to the runup to the Lunar New Year.
- Not visible at:
 - All-Military Combined Arms Training Meeting (October 2024).
 - 10 January 2025 CMC Discipline Inspection Commission Expanded Meeting (*where General He spoke*).
- Important/particularly relevant event for Political Commissars, many of whom attended.
 - “If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu” (& maybe even still).



在全军高级干部专题研讨班交流总结时强调
落实新时代政治建军方略
推进军一流提供坚强政治保证

- The Central Conference on Work Related to Neighboring Countries (中央周边工作会议) was held in Beijing from April 8 to 9. Xi Jinping attended the meeting and delivered a speech.
- He Weidong (何卫东), Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, was notably absent — the only member of the Politburo not in attendance.
- Among the People's Liberation Army senior generals in attendance were:
 - (1) Liu Zhenli (刘振立), Chief of the Joint Staff Department;
 - (2) Zhang Shengmin (张升民), Secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission;
 - (3) Dong Jun (董军), Minister of National Defense;
 - (4) Xu Xueqiang (许学强), Minister of the Equipment Development Department;
 - (5) Xu Qiling (徐起零), Deputy Chief of the Joint Staff Department; and
 - (6) He Hongjun (何宏军), Deputy Director of the Political Work Department.



Zhang Youxia



Liu Zhenli



Zhang Shengmin



Dong Jun



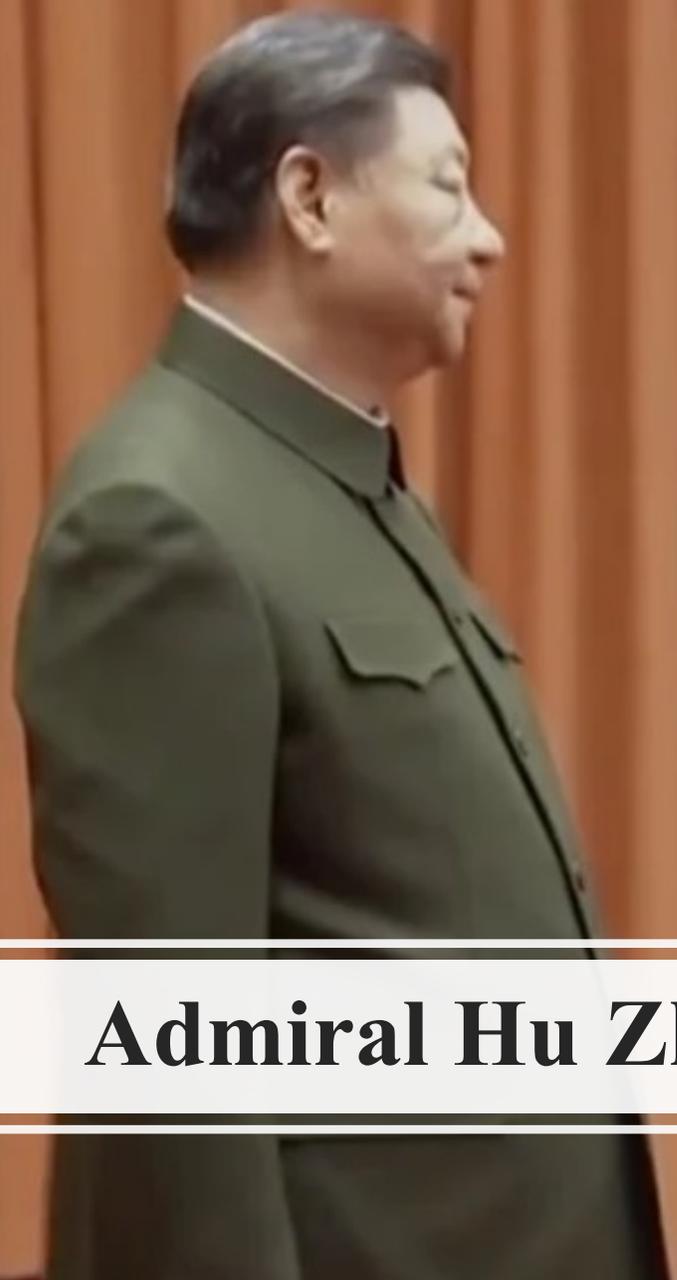
Xu Xueqiang

Xu Qiling

He Hongjun

Admiral Dong Jun: Staying but Stalled?

- PLAN Commander (2021–23).
- **Minister of National Defense since 29 December 2023.**
 - Replaced deposed predecessor General Li Shangfu after 4-month leadership gap.
- ***But has not become CMC Member or State Councilor.***
 - Unlike Li.
- Briefly absent, reportedly investigated.
 - But subsequently appears plugged in, attends key meetings.



Admiral Hu Zhongming: Control Case (So Far)

Admiral Wu Shengli: Legendary Legacy Affirmed



Former PLAN Commander Admiral Wu with
Commander-in-Chief Xi at gala for military elders in
Beijing, 17 January 2025.

Some Perspective: Former CMC VCs Xu & Guo

- CMC unprecedentedly has 2 positions (1/3 of 6 total) vacant simultaneously.
- ***But there was a previous great CMC purge under Xi:***
 - Vice Chairman General Xu Caihou (CCP CMC 2004–12, PRC CMC 2005–13; expelled 2014, died facing court martial 2015).
 - Vice Chairman General Guo Boxiong (CCP CMC 2002–12, PRC CMC 2003–13; expelled 2015, sentenced to life imprisonment 2016).
- ***Subsequent decade has arguably witnessed greatest military advancements in PRC/Chinese history.***



Corruption Paradox: Quality Triage



中国海事研究所
China Maritime Studies Institute

China Maritime Report No. 49

The PLAN Corruption Paradox

Insights from the 1st Destroyer Flotilla

Ryan D. Martinson

- For 2+ decades, PLAN has strived to *keep corruption from infecting personnel selection process in operating units.*
- *Heart of combat power insulated from corruption's worst effects.*
- Discipline Inspection Commission (anti-corruption “watchdog”) prioritizes units/personnel at the “tip of the spear.”
- Unit’s Party Committee must answer for poor performance; incentivized to ensure best leaders chosen.
- Ex. 1st Destroyer Flotilla: Clear regs., minimum qualifications, stricter evaluation standards, transparent selection process, knowledge/skills competitions = less leeway for corruption.



U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Est. 1884
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND



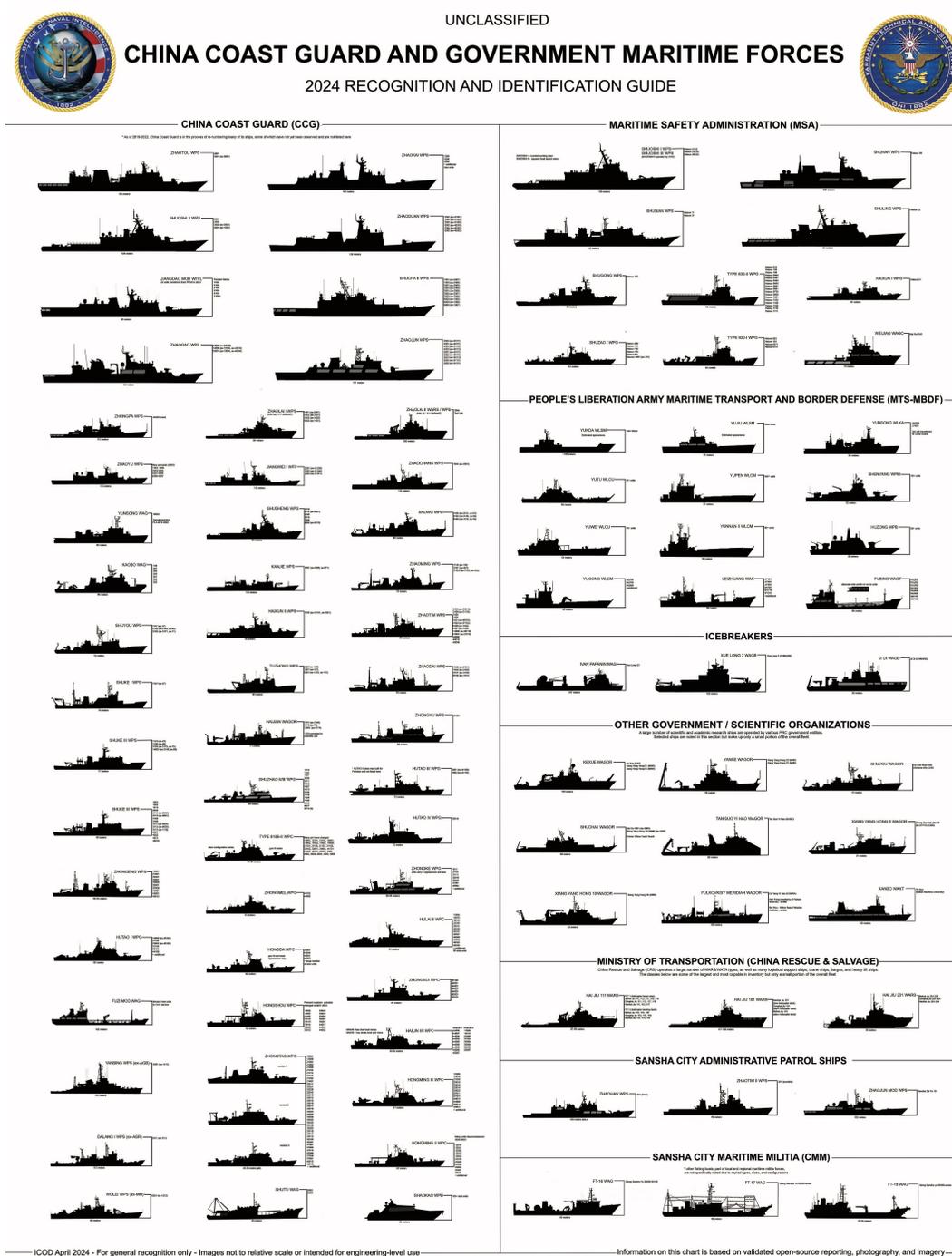
Figure 1. Captain Gao Ke Aboard the Frigate *Linyi*.⁵³



Figure 2. Commander Ma Wenpeng, Commanding Officer of the Destroyer *Urumuqi*.⁵⁴

Some Context: PRC Weaknesses... & Strengths

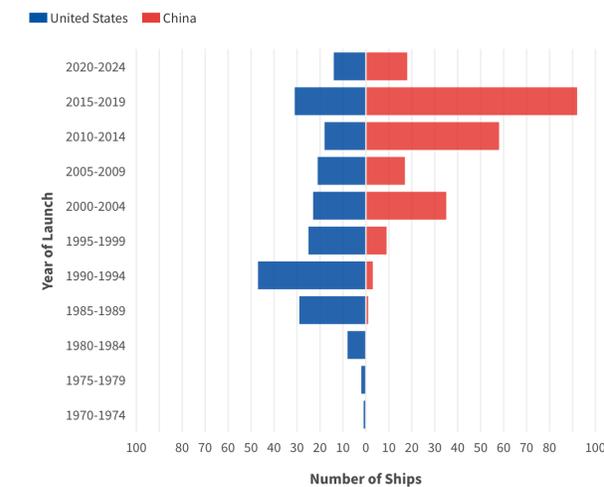
- ***Two things are true at once. CCP System:***
- ***Suffers endemic weaknesses –***
 - Ruthless elite power struggles, constant official purging.
 - Investigations confirmed/rumored to date would stress any nation’s armed forces.
- ***Also boasts tremendous strengths –***
 - Totalitarian means to mobilize & concentrate resources & personnel dramatically.
- This cuts both ways, deeply.
 - Unusual analytical challenge.
- **Overall: China’s military enjoys globally unrivaled resources & support by many measures.**



Military Buildup Unhindered: Individual Offramps, Collective Advancement

- ***Disciplinary-related removals appear not to have major impact on naval capabilities or operations.***
- The PLAN may be playing high-stakes musical chairs with its leadership, but it has deep enough talent pool to do so without prohibitive problems.
 - When one leader is purged, another appears on deck.
- Politicized corruption investigations & their imposition of costs are fundamentally a speedbump, a showstopper.
- Regardless of corruption's pervasive persistence, cutting-edge, lethal weapons systems regularly enter service.
 - PLAN capabilities to use them & conduct operations all continue to improve.
- **Corruption may contribute to inefficiencies, but it does not curtail PLAN advances.**
- **Related removals are neither an indicator of prohibitive incompetence nor a self-defeating constraint on operational capabilities.**

Active U.S. and Chinese Warships by Launch Date

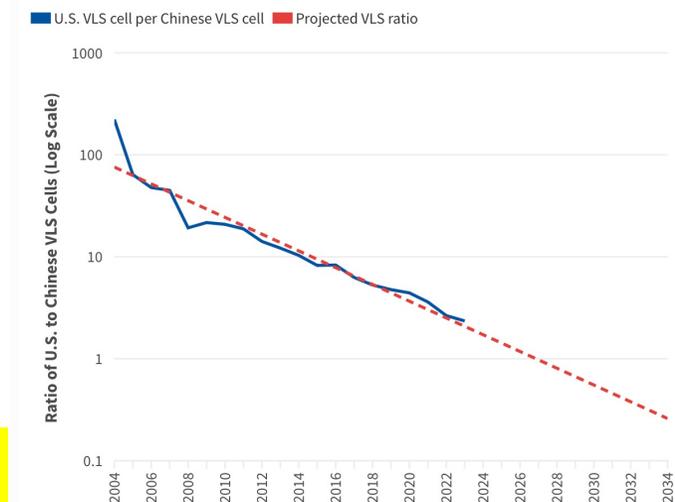


Source: *Janes Fighting Ships Yearbook 23/24*.

CSIS | TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT

The PLAN Could Surpass U.S. Navy Firepower by 2027

Ratio of Vertical Launch System Cells



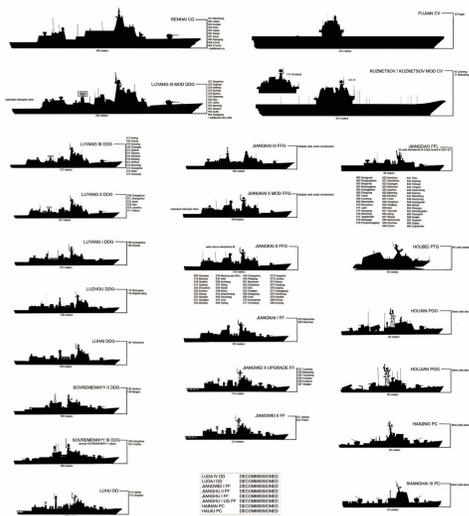
Source: *International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 2004–2024 editions; Janes Fighting Ships Yearbook 23/24*.

CSIS | TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT

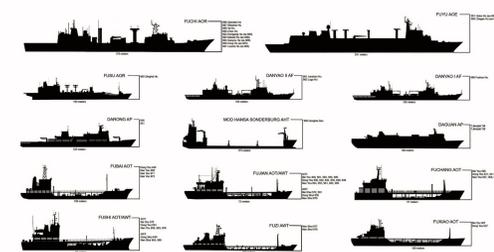
Case Study 1: PLA Navy Force Buildup



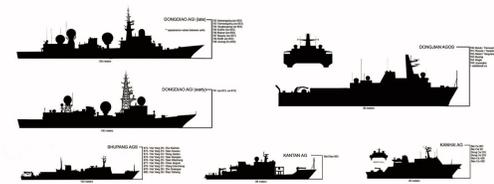
NAVAL COMBATANT SHIPS AND CRAFT



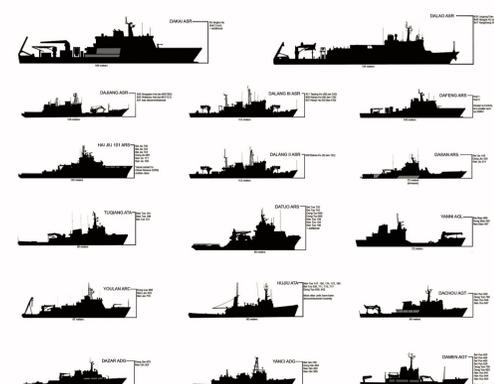
LOGISTICS SHIPS



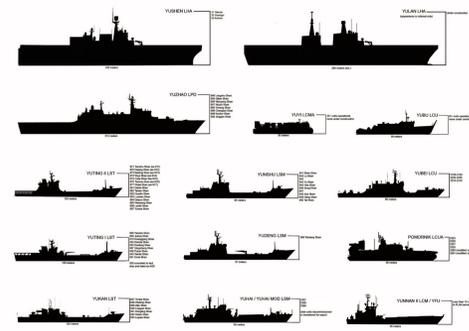
INTELLIGENCE / SURVEY / SPECIAL MISSION SHIPS



SERVICE AND SUPPORT SHIPS



AMPHIBIOUS SHIPS AND CRAFT



MINE WARFARE SHIPS AND CRAFT



YARD AND SERVICE CRAFT



MEDICAL SHIPS

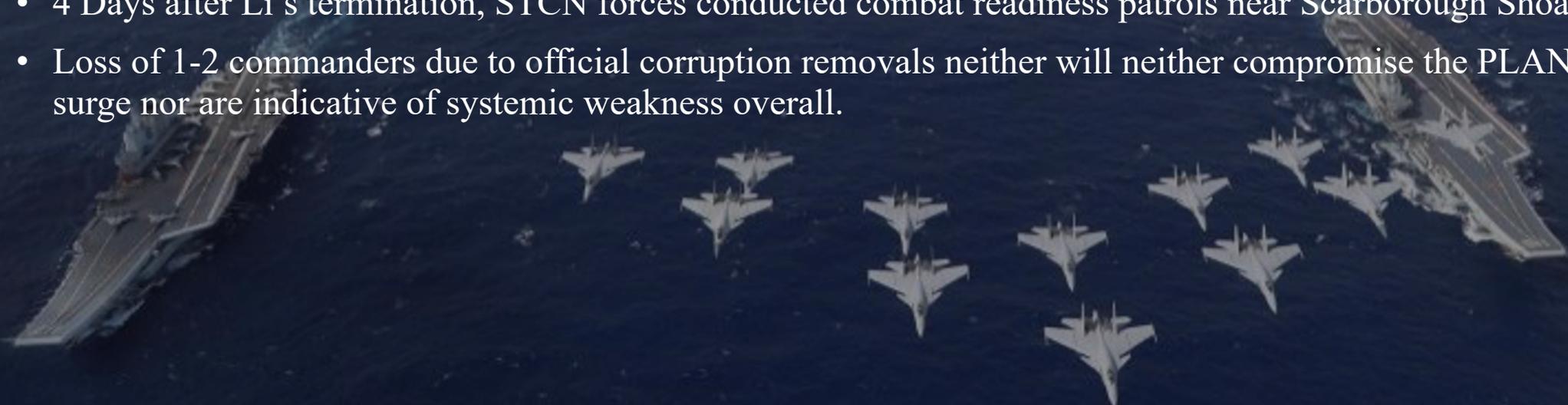


TEST AND TRAINING SHIPS / ICEBREAKERS

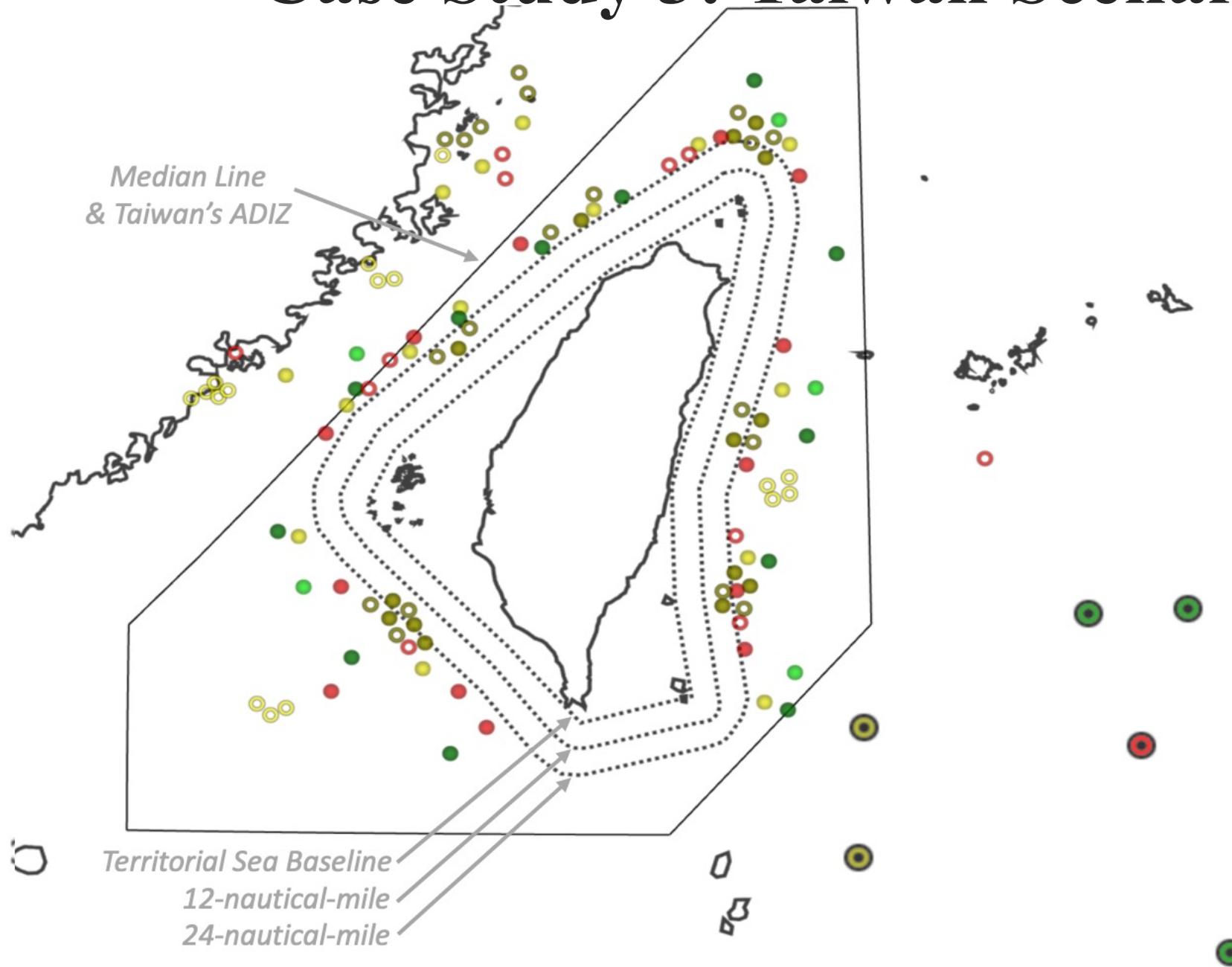


Case Study 2: South China Sea Ops

- 31 October 2024: unprecedented dual-carrier ops in South China Sea, realistic training.
- Centered on *Liaoning* & *Shandong* (whose development Hu Wenming & Sun Bo oversaw pre-imprisonment).
- Just 25 days before Li's dismissal from the PLAN. Investigation into Li certainly was ongoing then, if not already complete.
- Per INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Paparo's 9 September 2024 video call with STC Commander General Wu Yanan: "use of dangerous, coercive & potentially escalatory tactics in the South China Sea & beyond."
- Despite PLAN leadership shakeups, PLAN ops remain consistent, e.g., as supported by the manning, training & equipping responsibilities of the STC Navy Commander.
- 4 Days after Li's termination, STCN forces conducted combat readiness patrols near Scarborough Shoal.
- Loss of 1-2 commanders due to official corruption removals neither will neither compromise the PLAN's forward surge nor are indicative of systemic weakness overall.

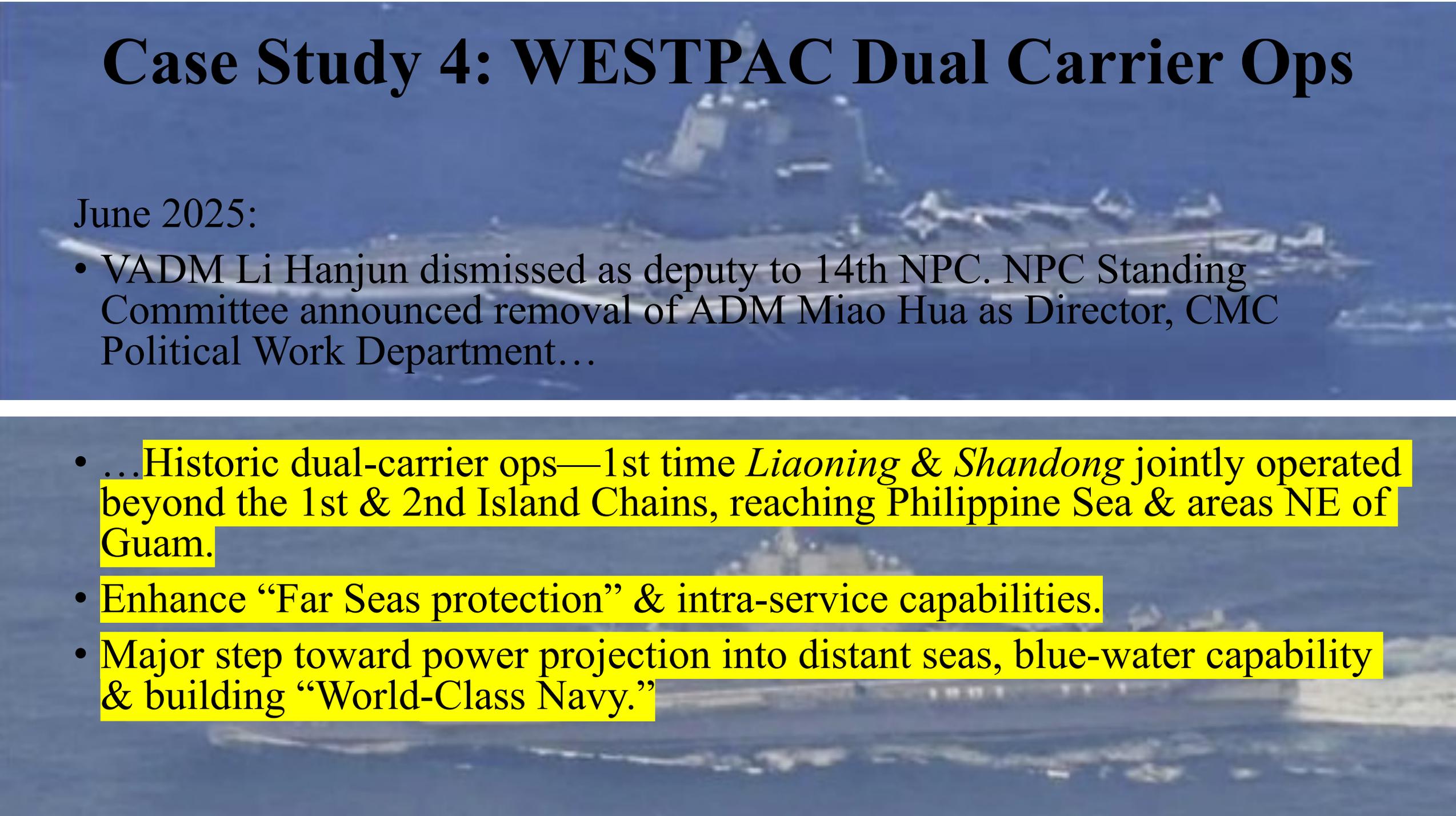


Case Study 3: Taiwan Scenario Exercises



2022 August		PLA Naval Vessels
2023 April		PLA Navy Vessels
		PLA CSG
2024 May		PLA Navy Vessels
		CCG Vessels
2024 October		PLA Navy Vessels
		CCG Vessels
		PLA CSG
2025 April		PLA Navy Vessels
		CCG Vessels
		PLA CSG

Case Study 4: WESTPAC Dual Carrier Ops

An aerial photograph of a large aircraft carrier, likely the Liaoning, sailing on the open ocean. The ship is viewed from a high angle, showing its deck and superstructure. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is a lighter blue.

June 2025:

- VADM Li Hanjun dismissed as deputy to 14th NPC. NPC Standing Committee announced removal of ADM Miao Hua as Director, CMC Political Work Department...
- ...Historic dual-carrier ops—1st time *Liaoning* & *Shandong* jointly operated beyond the 1st & 2nd Island Chains, reaching Philippine Sea & areas NE of Guam.
- Enhance “Far Seas protection” & intra-service capabilities.
- Major step toward power projection into distant seas, blue-water capability & building “World-Class Navy.”

Admiral Paparo's Testimony – 10 April 2025

“In 2024, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) demonstrated its growing capabilities through persistent multi-domain pressurization activities of increasing scope, scale, complexity, & number against Taiwan – combined with a significantly expanded daily air & maritime presence. China employs a multi-faceted approach combining military pressure, cognitive & cyber operations, & economic coercion. China's development of advanced missile systems, space & counter space capabilities, hypersonic weapons, chemical & biological weapons, a growing nuclear arsenal & expanding maritime capabilities presents an evolving challenge to regional stability.”



“Beijing's aggressive maneuvers around Taiwan are not just exercises – they are dress rehearsals for forced unification. The PLA escalated military pressure against Taiwan by 300% in 2024, through activities such as Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) entries & centerline crossings.”

https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/testimony_of_adm_paparo.pdf

Roads to Perdition Under Xi

1. **Dysfunction.** Graft/disciplinary violations undermining mission preparations.

— Equipment Department resource access. Li Pengcheng, Ju?

2. **Disloyalty.** Alternative “mountaintops” of power/patronage networks & beneficiaries.

— Xu, Miao? Li Pengcheng, Li Hanjun?

3. **Unreliability.** Falling short of, or questioning, ambitious objectives.

— e.g., 2027 Centennial Military Building Goal. He? Li Hanjun?





The Rot & the Rainforest: Progress Amid Putrefaction

- Lush capabilities “rainforest” flourishing feverishly...
- ...despite widespread rot...
- ...and some rotten corruption trees—*felled *selectively**
- *It's all about (Party) business, not (individual) personnel below Xi.*
- Don't miss the forest for the trees!

Questions?

www.andrewerickson.com

www.andrewerickson.com/meta (password: andrew)

<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2025/04/the-china-navy-leadership-bookshelf/>