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Signs of political instability in Chinese regime

China's Defence Minister General Li Shangfu has not been seen in public for the past three weeks, sparking speculation in the Western press that he is under investigation over corruption. He was last seen publicly when he gave a speech to the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum on August 29. Earlier in August, he travelled to Moscow and Minsk to meet with top Russian and Belarusian officials.



China's Defense Minister Gen. Li Shangfu during a visit to Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in Moscow, Russia, Monday, April 17, 2023. [AP Photo/Russian Defense Ministry Press Service]

Li had been expected to travel to Vietnam on September 7–8 to attend a meeting but the trip was cancelled at the last minute, ostensibly for “health reasons.” US ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel drew attention to Li’s absence last week when he claimed that the defence minister had not met with Singapore’s Navy commander.

Questioned a week ago about Li's apparent disappearance, a foreign ministry spokeswoman told reporters she was not aware of the situation. Requests for comment by Reuters to China's State Council and Defence Ministry elicited no response. No official statement or comment has appeared subsequently this week.

According to unnamed sources cited by Reuters, Li is under investigation for corruption over equipment procurement, along with other senior officials of the Equipment Development Department of the Central Military Commission, which he headed from 2017 to 2022. The US imposed sanctions on Li in 2018 for his involvement in the purchase of Russian military equipment.

Although the defence minister is not the top-ranking defence post, Li serves on the Central Military Commission chaired by Chinese President Xi Jinping, which is in overall command of the military. Moreover, he is one of China's five state councillors—a position that outranks that of ordinary ministers.

The absence of Li from public view comes in the wake of the disappearance of Foreign Minister Qin Gang—also in unexplained circumstances. Qin vanished from public view for a month before he was removed from office in late July and replaced by state councillor Wang Yi, the former foreign minister. His non-appearances over that month were also for “health reasons.”

Speculation in the Western media about Qin's fate ranged from investigation over corruption, resentment in the foreign ministry over his young age, to an alleged affair with a TV anchor while serving as Chinese ambassador to the US.

The *Wall Street Journal* gave more credence to the last explanation in an article this week. It claimed, citing unnamed sources, that a meeting of senior Chinese officials was briefed last month on the party's investigation into Qin and told he was dismissed over “lifestyle issues.” It found that had he had a child as a result of an extramarital affair and that concerns were raised about whether China's national security had been compromised.

China's State Council, however, still lists Qin as one of the five state councillors. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, China's foreign ministry and the State Council information office did not respond to questions about Qin.

In the absence of any official statement, and limited information, there are more questions than answers about what has happened to Li and Qin and why. Sex scandals and charges of corruption are exploited by the ruling classes worldwide as the means for destroying political opponents in internal factional warfare.

The most significant aspect of the clouds hanging over two top Chinese ministers is that they were both handpicked appointees of Xi. They were installed in March as the National People's Congress voted a third term for Xi as Chinese president. Qin, who is just 57, in particular, was regarded as one of Xi's protégés who had been catapulted into top positions within foreign affairs.

The regime headed by Xi confronts mounting economic difficulties at home even as the US intensifies its confrontation and preparations for war against China. The government has set a modest target for economic growth of just 5 percent for 2023—well below the 8 percent regarded by the regime as necessary to maintain employment and social stability. The property market has been hit by the failure of prominent developers. High debt levels, particularly at the provincial government level, are raising questions about the stability of the finance system.

Urban youth unemployment, which is contributing to social tensions and signs of political radicalisation among young people, soared to more than 20 percent this year before publication of the figures was discontinued. Moreover, the ending of the zero-COVID policy that has led mass infection and millions of deaths, is fuelling hostility and opposition to the regime.

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Xi is coming under intense pressure from Washington on all fronts—diplomatically, economically and militarily. US President Biden has maintained the huge tariffs imposed on China under Trump and intensified bans on the export of the most advanced chips and chip-making equipment to China in a bid to cripple its hi-tech industries. Even as the US wages war against Russia in Ukraine, it is ramping up a web of military alliances directed against China, expanding joint war games in the region and continuing its military provocations in waters close the Chinese mainland.

In this context, there is certainly the potential for rifts to emerge within the Chinese regime and Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Western media routinely portrays Xi as an unchallenged strongman or, in the words of Biden, as a “dictator.” In reality, he is in a

precarious position—a Bonapartist, balancing between CCP factions, between social classes and on the international stage.

An article in the Japanese newspaper, *Nikkei Asia*, on September 5, highlighted the internal tensions that apparently emerged last month at the annual beachside retreat of party leaders at Beidaihe. Written by senior staff writer Katsuji Nakazawa, who had served as correspondent in China, the report said party elders had been unusually critical of Xi for his handling of the country's multiple crises.

According to the *Nikkei*, the party elders convened their own meeting ahead of the retreat before dispatching representatives to Beidaihe to confront Xi and other leaders face-to-face. “The gist of the message was that if the political, economic and social turmoil continues without any effective countermeasures being taken, the party could lose public support, posing a threat to its rule,” article stated.

The article claimed that Xi responded by venting his frustration and pointing the finger at his three immediate predecessors—Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. “All the issues that were left by the previous three leaders are on my shoulders,” he reportedly told his top aides. “I’ve spent the last decade tackling them but they remain unresolved. Am I to blame?”

In the aftermath of the Beidaihe gathering, Xi did not attend the G20 summit in New Delhi earlier this month. He deputised Premier Li Qiang to go instead. Xi has not attended the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly taking place in New York, sending Vice President Han Zheng in his place.

There may be many explanations for Xi's absences, as well as the removal of Qin as foreign minister and the apparent disappearance of defence minister Li. However, taken together and in the context of the mounting problems and crises confronting Beijing, they do point to rising tensions and conflicts within the CCP bureaucracy and more broadly of political instability in China.

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